



## Jewish Theatres

Edited by Piero Capelli

PIERO CAPELLI – *Foreword*

FABRIZIO LELLI – *Italian Jews and Theatre in Early Modern Italy*

MICHELA ANDREATTA – *Piety on Stage: Popular Drama and the Public Life of Early Modern Jewish Confraternities*

CHIARA CARMEN SCORDARI – *Behind Multiple Masks: Leon Modena's Diasporic Tragedy L'Esther in Seventeenth-Century Venice*

ZHAVIT STERN – *The Archive, the Repertoire, and Jewish Theatre: Zygmunt Turkow Performs a National Dramatic Heritage*

YAIR LIPSHITZ – *Nocturnal Histories: Nighttime and the Jewish Temporal Imagination in Modern Hebrew Drama*

DIEGO ROTMAN – *Language Politics, Memory, and Discourse: Yiddish Theatre in Israel (1948-2003)*

### Miscellany

DAVID LUCKING – *Stony Limits and Envious Walls: Metamorphosing Ovid in Romeo and Juliet and A Midsummer Night's Dream*

CRISTINA CONSIGLIO – *Hamlet Overseas. The Acting Technique of Edwin Booth*

### Special Section

PATRICK GRAY – *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic: A Reply to Paul A. Cantor*

ELENA PELLONE – Will Tosh, *Playing Indoors: Staging Early Modern Drama in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse*, London and New York: Bloomsbury (The Arden Shakespeare), 2019, pp. 264

NICOLA PASQUALICCHIO – Andrew Filmer and Juliet Rufford (eds), *Performing Architectures: Projects, Practices, Pedagogies*, London and New York: Methuen, 2018, pp. 235

SALLY BLACKBURN-DANIELS – *A Theatrical Performance of Vernon Lee's The Ballet of the Nations*





# S K E N È

**Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies**

---

**6:2 2020**

Jewish Theatres

Edited by Piero Capelli

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

---

*Founded by Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri*

<i>Executive Editor</i>	Guido Avezzù.
<i>General Editors</i>	Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliuzzi.
<i>Editorial Board</i>	Simona Brunetti, Nicola Pasqualicchio, Susan Payne, Gherardo Ugolini.
<i>Managing Editors</i>	Valentina Adami, Emanuel Stelzer.
<i>Assistant Managing Editor</i>	Roberta Zanoni.
<i>Book Review Editors</i>	Chiara Battisti, Sidia Fiorato.
<i>Staff</i>	Petra Bjelica, Francesco Dall'Olio, Bianca Del Villano, Marco Duranti, Luca Laranga, Antonietta Provenza, Savina Stevanato, Angelica Vedelago.
<i>Typesetter</i>	Lorenza Baglieri.
<i>Advisory Board</i>	Anna Maria Belardinelli, Anton Bierl, Enoch Brater, Richard Allen Cave, Jean-Christophe Cavallin, Rosy Colombo, Claudia Corti, Marco De Marinis, Tobias Döring, Pavel Drábek, Paul Edmondson, Keir Douglas Elam, Ewan Fernie, Patrick Finglass, Enrico Giaccherini, Mark Griffith, Stephen Halliwell, Robert Henke, Pierre Judet de la Combe, Eric Nicholson, Guido Paduano, Franco Perrelli, Didier Plassard, Donna Shalev, Susanne Wofford.

Copyright © 2020 SKENÈ  
Published in December 2020  
All rights reserved.  
ISSN 2421-4353

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means  
without permission from the publisher.  
SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies  
<http://skenejournal.skeneproject.it>  
[info@skeneproject.it](mailto:info@skeneproject.it)

Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzù  
P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138, Verona (I)

## Contents

### Jewish Theatres

Edited by Piero Capelli

PIERO CAPELLI – <i>Foreword</i>	5
FABRIZIO LELLI – <i>Italian Jews and Theatre in Early Modern Italy</i>	15
MICHELA ANDREATTA – <i>Piety on Stage: Popular Drama and the Public Life of Early Modern Jewish Confraternities</i>	31
CHIARA CARMEN SCORDARI – <i>Behind Multiple Masks: Leon Modena’s Diasporic Tragedy L’Ester in Seventeenth-Century Venice</i>	53
ZEHAVIT STERN – <i>The Archive, the Repertoire, and Jewish Theatre: Zygmunt Turkow Performs a National Dramatic Heritage</i>	71
YAIR LIPSHITZ – <i>Nocturnal Histories: Nighttime and the Jewish Temporal Imagination in Modern Hebrew Drama</i>	91
DIEGO ROTMAN – <i>Language Politics, Memory, and Discourse: Yiddish Theatre in Israel (1948-2003)</i>	115

### Miscellany

DAVID LUCKING – <i>Stony Limits and Envious Walls: Metamorphosing Ovid in Romeo and Juliet and A Midsummer Night’s Dream</i>	147
CRISTINA CONSIGLIO – <i>Hamlet Overseas. The Acting Technique of Edwin Booth</i>	169

### Special Section

PATRICK GRAY – <i>Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic: A Reply to Paul A. Cantor</i>	189
ELENA PELLONE – <i>Will Tosh, Playing Indoors: Staging Early Modern Drama in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, London and New York: Bloomsbury (The Arden Shakespeare), 2019, pp. 264</i>	205
NICOLA PASQUALICCHIO – <i>Andrew Filmer and Juliet Rufford, eds, Performing Architectures: Projects, Practices, Pedagogies, London and New York: Methuen, 2018, pp. 235</i>	213
SALLY BLACKBURN-DANIELS – <i>A Theatrical Performance of Vernon Lee’s The Ballet of the Nations</i>	225



PIERO CAPELLI\*

## Foreword

If it wasn't for Jews, fags, and gypsies, there would be no theater.  
Mel Brooks, *To Be or Not To Be* (1983)

The essays collected in this issue of *Skene* deal with Jewish theatre at large – that is, theatre written and staged by Jews, about Jews, mostly (but not only) for Jews, in Hebrew or in other languages used by Jews in history. They show how much Jewish theatre diversified throughout the history and the cultures of the Jews,<sup>1</sup> yet maintaining a quite distinctive character of a tradition within a tradition. They also show several instances of how the tensions, polarities, and contradictions that have marked Jewish societies and Jewish tradition since the Renaissance were referred to or openly denounced in Jewish theatre.

As evidenced in these essays, the main question underlying the Jewish theatrical tradition was the quest for what Zehavit Stern defines a usable Jewish theatrical past, and how to build one within a wider cultural and religious tradition that had inherited no 'classic' dramatic canon from its past, nor even any theatrical text at all – with the one possible exception of the lengthy sequence of dramatic dialogues included in the Biblical book of *Job*. In its post-Biblical period, Judaism has mainly been a tradition of religious law and practice codified by the class of the rabbis. Right at the beginning of the formative period of rabbinic Judaism, the rabbis disavowed theatre as a despicable form of blasphemous admixture of their idea of Judaism with the surrounding dominant pagan cultures of the Hellenistic and

<sup>1</sup> I here refer to the definition by Biale 2002.

\* Università Ca' Foscari, Venezia – piero.capelli@unive.it



Roman period; or else, they only legitimated it when used as a farcical celebration of the generally hostile confrontation between the Jews and their pagan neighbours and/or rulers (such is the case, for instance, of the enactment of the Biblical story of Queen Esther, a specific theatrical genre which will later be named *Purimshpil*, as we will see further). In the Babylonian Talmud, the canonical compilation of rabbinic legal and intellectual tradition (fourth to seventh cent.), the following normative statement is found: “Our rabbis say: One must not go to theatres [*tarteyaot*] nor to circuses, since in such places people entertain themselves with pagan entertainments” (tractate *Avodah Zarah*, 18b). The rabbinic paradigm of Judaism became mainstream in Jewish tradition until and even beyond the onset of secularisation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to the extent that it is commonly referred to as Judaism *tout court*. Theatre and theatres were thus formally and normatively considered as places, both symbolic and concrete, of cultural, possibly even religious promiscuity and hybridization with non-Jewish cultures, critically endangering the kind of Jewish identity that the rabbinic class meant to promote.

Nevertheless, as shown in several of the essays collected here, starting from the Renaissance, rabbinic tradition and the literary and social practice of theatre were mutually linked in a dialectical relationship by which, especially in Italy, several of the most important authors of Jewish theatre of the modern age emerged precisely from the ranks of the rabbinical class. Such are the cases of Leon Modena (1571-1648) (whose allegorical rewriting of the Biblical story of Queen Esther is analysed in Chiara C. Scordari’s essay), Mosheh Zacuto (d. 1697), and possibly Mosheh Hayyim Luzzatto (1707-1746). Leone de’ Sommi Portaleone’s (d. 1597 ca.) *Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche* (*Four Dialogues on Scenic Performances*), composed in Mantua in the second half of the sixteenth century, were the first and definitely most influential attempts at formulating a specifically Jewish theory of theatre. De’ Sommi established that theatre as a genre in Jewish literature should have moral instruction as its ultimate aim: he thus found a viable mediation between the normative ruling of the rabbis, the deeply rooted ideology of Hebrew as the sacred tongue, and the new Renaissance taste for literature and theatre. As Fabrizio Lelli puts it in his essay, “if the play form *was* novel for Hebrew, its capacity for creating parables and proverbs was well-known, and so *could* make it even more marvellous as a medium for theatrical entertainment”. Morally-focused allegorical drama was thus established as the most important subgenre in Jewish theatre – and the most practiced one too, well into the twentieth century, as we will see here.

Jewish intellectuals of the Renaissance such as de’ Sommi were well aware of the need to build a Jewish theatrical repertoire – or rather, draw-

ing on a distinction influentially proposed by Diana Taylor and referred to by Zehavit Stern in her essay, the need for a Jewish theatrical *archive* (Taylor 2003). Minority identity, historical memory of suffered persecutions, and satire of Gentile persecutors merge in the first typically Jewish theatrical subgenre, namely, the rewriting (first as poetry, and later specifically for the stage) of narratives taken from the Hebrew Bible, particularly – as stated above – of the book of *Esther* with its unsettling narrative of thwarted pogroms and pre-emptive violence against real or potential enemies of the Jews. Performances based on the story of Esther were staged on the occasion of the feast of *Purim* (whose mythical foundation is narrated in the Biblical book); in time they came to be called by the Yiddish name of *Purimshpil* among the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe, though they are first attested in Jewish communities of Italy in the Renaissance, due to the crossed influences of various literary traditions: i. medieval Christian miracle plays, ii. Greek and Roman theatre as it was being rediscovered by Humanist scholars, and iii. *midrash*, the vast exegetical and homiletic literature on the Bible produced in Hebrew by the rabbis in late antiquity and the middle ages.<sup>2</sup> The adaptation of motifs taken from the Bible and from early rabbinic literature to theatrical genres – in particular to the erudite situation comedy of Italian Renaissance – already emerged in *Zahut bedihuta de-kiddushin* (*A Comedy of Betrothal*), ascribed to Leone de' Sommi and widely considered as the earliest comedy ever written in the Hebrew language. As stated in Fabrizio Lelli's essay, de' Sommi made explicit references to *pilpul* (the dialogical and dialectical discussion of issues of religious law as it took, and still takes, place in traditional Orthodox rabbinic schools) and used it dramaturgically in a parodistic perspective. This is possibly the earliest literary example of the self-deprecating tendentious humour analysed by Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) and popularised by Yiddish literature and Jewish American theatre and cinema of the 20th century.

Leon Modena's allegorical tragedy *Ester* (Venice 1619), once again based on the Biblical book, is here analysed in detail by Chiara C. Scordari. The play is dedicated to the Venetian lyrical poet and *salonnière* Sara Copio Sullam, a distant relative of Modena's, then targeted as a potential convert to Christianity by Ansaldo Cebà, also a poet and the author of an epic poem on *Queen Esther* (*La Reina Ester*, Genoa 1615). Cebà's fictional Esther, a believer in the future coming of Christ, was being used by the poet as an *exemplum* for Copio Sullam. The most prominent female character in Modena's play is rather that of Vashti, the queen repudiated by king Ahasuerus and replaced by Esther. In Modena's rewriting of the Bib-

<sup>2</sup> On the *Purimshpil* see Rosenzweig 2011.

lical story, nourished with a vast acquaintance of Italian early Baroque literary tradition, queen Vashti – otherwise an almost irrelevant character in the Biblical book – commits suicide at the beginning of the play, thus being turned into a sort of non-Jewish symbol of the loyalty of the Jewish people to themselves. On the other hand, Esther represents both the conforming to other peoples' will and the concealing of one's own identity. The play is therefore an allegorical representation of the option between martyrdom (*kiddush ha-Shem*, "sanctification of [God's] Name") and crypto-Judaism – a decision Jews had often had to take, starting from the persecutions by the Crusaders until the expulsions from Spain (1492) and Portugal (1497). In order to pursue his literary aim, Modena made Vashti into a sort of proto-feminist heroine. Yet, on a practical and political level, the Jewish attitude towards Gentile authority and power endorsed by Modena in his play remained the same as it had been at least since the middle ages – that is, a loyalism of the same kind advocated by Simone Luzzatto, Modena's contemporary and fellow rabbi in Venice, in his *Discorso sopra il stato de gl'Hebrei* (*Discourse on the Condition of the Jews*, Venice 1638; see Veltri and Lissa 2019), and thus expressed by one of Modena's characters: "Have there ever been Jews who, in captivity and submission, have become seditious, traitors, rebels, or who turned against their prince or lord? This never happened. Rather they are humble sheep who live obediently".<sup>3</sup> Last, Modena depicts the character of Mordechai as a type of the so-called "court Jew" – a peculiar social profile in Iberian Judaism before the expulsions (see Yerushalmi 1971) – and of his "two-hats existence" as both a courtier loyal to a non-Jewish kingdom and a devoted Jew who refuses to kneel in front of idols. Modena's *Esther* is thus at the same time a staging of, and a plan for, the Jewish existence confined in ghettos (the first ghetto of modern Europe had of course been established in Venice in 1516).

The reshaping of the public sphere in Jewish micro-societies of 18th-century Italian ghettos is described in Michela Andreatta's essay from the perspective of liturgy as musical theatre: a complexly structured moment of piety (even of a mystical kind), self-representation, and socialization that had a crucial – though not yet adequately acknowledged – importance in perpetuating Jewish identity and community structures in Italy during the long age of ghettos and Counter-Reformation. The case studied here is the dramatic reading of Mosheh Zacuto's poem *Tofteh arukh* (*Hell Arrayed*), a description of Hell and its chastisements published posthumously in Venice in 1715 and nocturnally recited in Ferrara in 1720 by the *Ḥadashim la-Bekarim* (*Daily Renewal*) Jewish confraternity. Performances and stagings of this kind, whose musical accompaniment was often assigned to Gentile com-

<sup>3</sup> Translation by Scordari. On Jewish loyalism see Yerushalmi 2005.

posers, could reach the scale of full-fledged operatic productions. Zacuto was well acquainted both with the kind of affective piety that was a hallmark of Christian Counter-Reformation, and with the style and rhetoric of non-Jewish baroque literature – both aimed at eliciting the inwardness of their audience, not only at a spiritual level (many of these performances were strongly characterised by mysticism), but mostly at an emotional and aesthetic level, no longer in an exoteric but rather in a collective dimension: an actual “theatre of the mind”, as Andreatta describes it, rather than a theatre of action. From the cultural perspective, the walls surrounding Italian ghettos were much more of an osmotic barrier than is still generally imagined (cf. e.g. Andreatta 2016, 7-12).

The aforementioned issue of creating a Jewish theatrical archive was taken very seriously in the quantitatively most relevant of pre-Israeli Jewish theatrical traditions: the one that was expressed in the Yiddish language. The first written collections of *Purimshpil* were compiled at the beginning of the eighteenth century by the German Christian scholar Johann Jakob Schudt.<sup>4</sup> No earlier than the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century, abreast of the emergence of Jewish nationalism, there began theatrical productions in Yiddish, starting from Avrom Goldfaden’s recitals at Shimen Mark’s *The Green Fruit-Tree Garden* café in Iași in 1876 (see e.g. Berkowitz 2002, 10ff). With this came an inner-Jewish rediscovery and ennoblement of the *Purimshpil*, no longer considered as a low-level form of entertainment nor as a reason for embarrassment regarding the surrounding dominant cultures, but rather, in Zehavit Stern’s wording, as “a historical artifact and a source of national pride”.

As stated above, Stern applies to Yiddish theatre Diana Taylor’s differentiation between the “repertoire” and the “archive” of theatrical tradition – a differentiation that can also be formulated as that between the *langue* and the *parole*, or between the canon and the performance, of theatre as a literary genre. The case considered by Stern is that of the *Tsentral Teater* established and directed by Zygmunt Turkow in the 1920s in Warsaw. The core themes that can be identified in the trajectory of the *Tsentral Teater*, and of Yiddish theatre at large, are, in Stern’s words, “the unique nature of modern Jewish nationalism, and the special path that Yiddish culture took in what regards the weighty tasks of nation building and cultural rejuvenation”. But another crucial issue at stake here was the relation between the intellectual class of Ashkenazi *Ostjudentum* (which will come to constitute the first ruling class of the new State of Israel) and the working class of the

<sup>4</sup> In the 3rd volume of his *Jüdische Merckwürdigkeiten (Jewish Notabilia)* (Frankfurt and Leipzig 1714) and in his *Jüdisches Franckfurter und Prager Freuden-Fest (Jewish Festivals in Francfort and Prague)* (Frankfurt 1716).

*shtetlach*, the mainly Jewish country villages of Central and Eastern Europe. In 1923 the *Tsentrāl Teater* staged Shloyme Ettinger's satirical comedy *Serkele* (written around one century earlier), where the hypocrisy of Orthodox Jews was contrasted with the authentic devotion of the Jewish representatives of Illuministic rationalism (the *maskilim*). *Serkele* was written in the wake of Molière's comedy and of Lessing's bourgeois drama, but also of the moral drama of the late Renaissance and Baroque as made popular in Italian ghettos (as seen in Andreatta's essay) until Mosheh Ḥayyim Luzzatto's early seventeenth-century allegorical dramas.<sup>5</sup> Yitskhok Shlosberg's stage music for *Serkele* was inspired by Jewish traditional music from Galicia; also specific museum research was conducted for Moyshe Apelboym's set design and stage costumes. Shifting as it was in between the musealised, ossified dimension of the archive and the living performance of the repertoire, the staging of *Serkele* was thus, in Stern's wording, the "staging of a national heritage". Likewise, the staging at the *Tsentrāl Teater* of Mendele Moykher Sforim's *Der Priziv* in 1924, forty years after its writing, was (and was presented as) the recovery of a historical document, that included a *Purimshpil* scene. Turkow endeavoured to promote a new Jewish theatre by recognising the *Purimshpil*'s antiquity as "archive", drawing a parallel between it and modern-age non-Jewish comic theatre (especially the Italian *commedia dell'arte* and the French *cabotine*), and entangling the latter in the earlier from the dramaturgical standpoint – the same interwoven perspective from which Yitskhok Schiper, a close friend of Turkow's, was writing the history of Jewish theatre in those same years (Schiper 1923-1928). Still, the traditional perception and reception of *Purimshpil* as a low-level form of theatre and cultural heritage impaired the final success of Turkow's experiment.

After the Shoah and the foundation of the State of Israel, the plurality and pluralism of the cultures of the Jews exploded as a contradiction and a conflict between ideologies, for example between the new Israeli ruling class, mostly of an Askhenazi origin, and the immigration of Jews from the Sephardi and near-Eastern diaspora from 1948 onwards. What had been the quest for a 'usable' Jewish past in Yiddish theatre came to conflict with the official cultural policy of the new State. The official ideal of the Jew and Israeli citizen was now that of the *sabra*, the free and independent native, a winner who only spoke the Hebrew language as invented anew by Eliezer Ben Yehuda (1858-1922), as contrasted with the traditional loser's image of the European *Ostjude*, fearful, subdued, and persecuted, expressing himself in a low-level Germanic dialect as Yiddish. As Lelli points out, a liter-

<sup>5</sup> See Danieli 2003's edition of Luzzatto's *La-yesharim tehillah* (*Praised Be the Righteous*).

ary production in Yiddish had started in sixteenth-century Italy (with Elijah Levita's adaptation of chivalry novels in the Italian vernacular such as *Buovo d'Antona* and *Paris e Vienna*) precisely as a contamination and entanglement of genres and languages. Diego Rotman recounts in his essay the misfortunes of the Yiddish language and its literature and theatre in the first decades of Israel's history – what Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin described as the “negation of exile” (Raz-Krakotzkin 1994 quoted by Rotman), that is, the suppression of a Jewish past now perceived as embarrassing and of its “lachrymose” commemoration, according to Salo W. Baron's famous definition (Baron 1928). By the same token, Israeli Zionist ideologues could only tolerate a theatrical art in Yiddish that would “divest itself of the diaspora clothing and wear Hebrew uniform in sound and in style” (thus the critic Asher Nahor in 1953 in the newspaper *Herut*, quoted by Rotman). Although the Yiddish stage was by now richly endowed with an “archive” of its own – one much older and richer than its Israeli counterpart –, and although it was totalling many more performances and public than the Hebrew-speaking municipal or national theatres such as the Cameri or the Habima, State organisations and Israeli press remained politically and intellectually averse to Yiddish cinema and stage. After the Eichmann trial of 1961, Yiddish and its theatrical literature did gain some ground in Israel, if mainly in the perspective of the musealisation of an almost extinguished civilisation (the “vanished world” photographed by Roman Vishniac in the 1930s; Vishniac 1983). Yiddish theatre was meant to be received first and foremost in Hebrew translation, and even so, it was still perceived as more akin to folklore than to ‘high’ culture. A reclaiming of the Yiddish stage as Israel's “intangible heritage” (thus Rotman), no longer perceived as incompatible with *sabra* culture and Zionist ideology, was made possible in 1965 by Shmuel Bunim's recovery of *Purimshpil* – once again – in his direction of Itzik Manger's *Di Megile lider* (*The Esther Scroll Poems*, written in 1936) in the original Yiddish in the Hammam Theatre in Jaffa. The immigration of Yiddish-speaking actors and writers from Russia in 1969-1971 led in 1975 to the establishment of the state-financed Yiddish Kunst Teater, which was nonetheless used as a vehicle for the assimilation of the new immigrants. Even in 1976, in the newspaper *Davar*, Zeev Rav-Nof defined Yiddish theatre as a “commercial melodrama . . . which today is nothing more than nostalgia” (quoted by Rotman) – precisely, the nostalgia for the vanished world of the *shtetl*. Likewise, Michael Handzelzalts, reviewing in *Haaretz* the premiere of Sholem Aleichem's *Shver tsu zayn a yid* (*It's Hard to be a Jew*) directed by Israel Becker in 1988 at the Yiddishpiel Theater (then recently established in Tel Aviv by Shmulik Atzmon-Wircer), stated: “At least one good thing had come out of Zionism: it had made this type of theatre a thing of the past” (quoted by Rotman). Nowadays Yiddish culture is no longer perceived as a



threat for Israeli culture, and a National Authority for Yiddish Culture was established in 1996. And yet, the activity of the Yiddishpiel Theater is still perceived as a sub-cultural niche phenomenon: in Rotman's words, a "mu-seological project of remembrance".

A defining feature of Judaism since antiquity has been the expectation of a messiah who will come to gather the Jewish people, redeem it from exile in the Diaspora, and lead it back to the Land that its God had long promised to them. In the Jewish tradition, such an expectation almost unavoidably determined a teleological understanding and framing of history – and of Jewish history in particular. Although modern Israel was born a secular, officially non-religious State, the religious stream within Zionism read and still reads its history and its very existence (including the harsh conflict with the Arab countries and the socially excruciating issue of disputed territories) as the fulfilment of that expectation. This made it possible that Jewish religious performative traditions were continued in Israeli theatre, either in a secular, sometimes even critical perspective, or else through their re-reading by a recent theatrical tradition originated in the Orthodox environment (e.g. in Amichai Hazan and Oshri Maimon's *Tikkun hazot* [*The Midnight Amending*], of 2017, analysed in Yair Lipshitz's essay). The idea of Zionism as the civil religion of the new Israel was well represented already as of 1936 in a line from Nathan Bistrizky's play *Ba-laylah ha-zeh* (*On This Night*): the generation of the fifth wave of immigrants to Israel (*aliyyah*) (1929-1939) "is not afraid of profaning the sacred, because it sanctifies the profane" (translated by Lipshitz).

For sure, the relationship between Jewish theatre and Israeli theatre can be described in terms of obvious discontinuousness. Yet, one should also discern the endurance of performative practices, metaphors, and symbols that can be traced back to the space occupied by theatre in the social life of Jewish communities, confraternities, and mystic circles since the early modern age. A meaningful example of this continuity is described in Yair Lipshitz's investigation of the nocturnal setting of some Hebrew plays written by Jewish playwrights settled in Mandatory Palestine (1917-1948) and in the State of Israel as a metaphor of the time of exile, whose end was coveted and prayed for by the Jews over almost two thousand years (one cannot but recollect the title of Elie Wiesel's successful autobiographical retelling of the Shoah: *La nuit*, of 1958), but also as a meta-time that Jews should devote to meditation on Time – that is, on their history and destiny. The symbolism of night and darkness can be traced back to canonical and non-canonical Jewish and Jewish-Christian religious writings of late antiquity, from the Dead Sea Scrolls to Johannine literature and the Talmud, but it is peculiarly explicit and meaningful in Jewish liturgy from the sixteenth century onwards, as seen for instance in the nocturnal reading of Mosheh

Zacuto's above-mentioned poem *Tofteh arukh* – or even more so, in the nocturnal Kabbalistic ritual of *tikkun ḥazot*, the “midnight amending” of the universe (whence the title and content of Hazan and Maimon's aforementioned play), a ritual by which pious Kabbalists from the sixteenth century on strived to cooperate on the amending of the Godhead's inner dynamics and of a cosmos that had originally been corrupted by the interference of Evil in God's plan (see Idel 2020). It was also at night that, according to the Biblical book of *Exodus*, the Jews were delivered by their God from slavery in Egypt and were therefore born as a people – the most important founding myth of Judaism, one still ritually commemorated today in the yearly reading of the Passover Haggadah, where the formula “On this night” that gave its title to Bistritzky's aforementioned play is to be found.

## Works Cited

- Andreatta, Michela, ed. 2016. *Mošèh Zacuto. L'inferno allestito. Poema di un rabbino del Seicento sull'oltretomba dei malvagi*. Milano: Bompiani.
- Baron, Salo Wittmayer. 1928. “Ghetto and Emancipation: Shall We revise the Traditional View?”. *Menorah Journal* 14: 515-26.
- Berkowitz, Joel. 2002. *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Biale, David, ed. 2002. *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, 3 vols. New York: Schocken Books.
- Danieli, Natascia. 2003. *La-yešarim tehillah di Mošeh Ḥayyim Luzzatto: introduzione, traduzione e commento*. Ph.D. dissertation, Torino: Dipartimento di Orientalistica, Università di Torino.
- Idel, Moshe. 2020. *Primeval Evil in Kabbalah: Totality, Perfection, Perfectibility*. Brooklyn, NY: Ktav.
- Marotti, Ferruccio, ed. 1968. *Leone de' Sommi. Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche*. Archivio del teatro 1. Milano: Il Polifilo.
- Raz-Krakotzkin, Amnon. 1994. “Exile in the Midst of Sovereignty: A Critique of *Shelilat ha-Galut* in Israeli Culture II”. *Theory and Criticism* (in Hebrew) 5: 113-32.
- Rosenzweig, Claudia. 2011. “Il *Purim-shpil*: origini e trasformazioni”. *Altre Modernità* (special issue: *La Bibbia in scena*): 22-43.
- Schipper, Yitskhok (Ignacy). 1923-1928. *Geshikhte fun yidisher teater-kunst un drame fun di eltste tsaytn biz 1750 (History of Jewish Theater and Drama: From the Oldest Times until the year 1750)*, 3 vols. Warsaw: Kultur-Lige.
- Taylor, Diana. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Veltri, Giuseppe, and Anna Lissa, eds. 2019. *Simone Luzzatto. Discourse on the State of the Jews. Bilingual Edition*. Studies and Texts in Scepticism 7. Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter.
- Vishniac, Roman. 1983. *A Vanished World. With a Foreword by Elie Wiesel*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.



- Yerushalmi, Yosef Haim. 2005. *Servants of Kings and Not Servants of Servants: Some Aspects of the Political History of the Jews*. Tenenbaum Family Lecture Series in Judaic Studies. Atlanta: Tam Institute for Jewish Studies, Emory University.
- 1971. *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto. Isaac Cardoso: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Marranism and Jewish Apologetics*. Columbia University Studies in Jewish History, Culture, and Institutions 1. New York: Columbia University Press.

FABRIZIO LELLI\*

## Italian Jews and Theatre in Early Modern Italy

Abstract

At the turn of the sixteenth century, Italian Jews usually adapted some of the most common motifs cherished by non-Jewish Renaissance scholars to their speculative, scientific, and literary productions. This phenomenon may explain the development of the specific interest by Italian Jews in theatre over the following centuries. While tragedies, comedies, and other dramatic forms inspired by the revival of classical theatre were composed and performed in Italian by Jewish authors for both a Jewish and a non-Jewish audience, more traditional Jewish theatrical genres, such as the *Purimspiel*, were now reinterpreted, in both Hebrew and the local Judaeo-languages, to suit the new stylistic standards current among non-Jews. The growing involvement of Jews in staging activities brought to their wide renown as actors and impresarios, and to the establishment of Jewish dramatic societies.

KEYWORDS: Renaissance theatre; Hebrew literature; Jews in Italy; *Purimspielen*; Leone de' Sommi; Leon Modena

Theatrical performances in Early Modern Italy could be of two kinds, both inspired by previously existing models: staging of specific sections of the Christian liturgy or of narrative passages of the Scriptures; adaptations of classical (mainly Latin) dramas. The new fascination with antiquity displayed by late fifteenth and sixteenth-century authors, who revived Greco-Roman literary genres and adapted them to their times, paved the way to the interference between the two productions. Plots that drew inspiration from the Bible or the sacred representations of the past were adopted for tragedies, comedies, pastoral dramas, and interludes that mainly followed the canons of classical theatre.<sup>1</sup> Characters associated with Judaism (mainly performed by non-Jewish actors) would appear on stage, either to move the highest sentiments of the spectators to virtue or to amuse them; they could be shaped after the most popular repertoire of medieval performances, in which the Jew generally played the villain or the fool,<sup>2</sup> or ac-

<sup>1</sup> See the classic but still valid Nicoll 1927; Ducharte 1966.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, Judah's character in late Medieval mysteries meant to stress the inclination to evil of contemporary Jews: see Newbegin and Wisch 2012; Newbegin 2014.

\* University of Salento - fabrizio.elli@unisalento.it

ording to classical tragedy's heroic patterns,<sup>3</sup> or the stereotypical roles of Greco-Latin comedy or Italian *commedia dell'arte*.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of the Rabbinic rules that prevented Jews from adhering to literary trends that were not rooted in the Jewish tradition, Italian communities cherished the most significant productions of non-Jews (see Lesley 1992). Indeed, already in the pre-Modern era, they adopted some of the most common motifs fashionable among their neighbours. For such intellectual borrowings they could either use the holy language or local vernaculars. Starting from the thirteenth century, all over the Mediterranean area, but especially in the Italian peninsula, Jewish intellectuals turned the most important products of non-Hebrew literatures into Hebrew. If this phenomenon triggered the translation of mainly scientific texts, Jews also adopted poetical and narrative 'external' productions in order to stress that their literary legacy did not consist only of religious books. Moreover, by adapting new genres to Hebrew, they could stress the role played by the Bible in the shaping of a universal knowledge: in other words, the language of the Scripture, allegedly held as the most ancient and sacred of all, was flexible enough to be used for purposes other than the liturgical or juridical ones. From a different perspective, creating Hebrew *belles-lettres* that were grounded in Biblical patterns also meant that the Hebrew Scripture treasured all possible knowledge and was ultimately the model of inspiration of the nations.<sup>5</sup>

Such attitude is well expressed, for instance, in the intellectual work of one of the most cultured Italian Jewish intellectuals of the fifteenth century, Yoḥanan ben Yiṣḥaq Alemanno (c. 1435 - c. 1504). An itinerant teacher, like most of his contemporary colleagues, Alemanno spent long periods of his life wandering about the most thriving centres of early Renaissance Italy: Mantua, Ferrara, and Florence. In the latter city, he was inspired also by his non-Jewish acquaintances to compose a Hebrew biography of King Solomon, shaped after the classical genre of the lives of illustrious men. In the introduction of his long *Commentary on Song of Songs*, titled *Heṣeq Šelomoh* (Solomon's Yearning), Alemanno explains the reasons that induced him to behave like his non-Jewish contemporaries, that drew upon Plutarch or

<sup>3</sup> On Esther as a tragic heroine in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Italy, see Arbib 2003.

<sup>4</sup> See also below. On the development of such Jewish characters, especially in the seventeenth-century Italian theatre, see Gurney 2015.

<sup>5</sup> As a matter of fact, non-Jews, in their turn, especially in Italy, passionately investigated the traditional forms of Jewish hermeneutics of the Bible in order to found the bases of a universal knowledge belonging to all religious and philosophical systems. On these intellectual phenomena that characterized the encounter of Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals in late Medieval and Early Modern Italy, see Bonfil 1994.

Valerius Maximus to deal with the lives of the *exempla virtutis* (models of virtues) of their own generation (see also Lelli 2004a, 29):

I shall not, however, amplify this discussion further, because I am very well aware, my son, that you are a wise and understanding man, a Jew who is not used to such long stories about a man and his deeds, and who might say that listening to the bleating of this flock of Solomon's virtues wears the mind. You may say: "All these virtues are already recorded in the book of *Chronicles*. Why must you recount his statutes and teachings? Praise the Lord with grateful, noble words for He is awesome and praiseworthy". Listen, therefore, to my replies to anyone who would seal his ears from hearing more. First, I greatly envied those among all the nations who praise their idols and compose about a single man whole hosts of books as long as the chronicles of the kings of Israel and Judah combined; while we the community of Jews, do not know how to give two or three particles of praise to one of the holy men of our people. I have, therefore, opened my mouth to glorify and praise King Solomon, may he rest in peace, with many praises. I took it upon myself to put them into a book in an order that will make apparent to all the nations that we have a heart like them.  
(qtd in Lesley 1976, 53).

In Alemanno's words, King Solomon may become the model for the fifteenth century Jewish intellectual who is knowledgeable enough to master all possible contemporary sciences, including the most recent achievements of non-Jewish scholarship.

Focusing on the most popular literary genres among gentiles, and adapting them to the biblical narrative was a specific habit, especially of Northern Italian Judaism at the turn of the sixteenth century. We still have, for instance, lengthy poems on the Scriptural *Books of Kings* in four-line strophes of two rhyming couplets, and a poetic version of the *Books of Samuel* dating to the end of the fifteenth century. Elia Levita (1469-1549), best known for his intellectual collaboration with non-Jews and especially with the Roman Cardinal Egidio Antonini da Viterbo (1469-1532), adapted two chivalric stories, known to him in their Italian version, *Buovo d'Antona* and *Paris e Vienna* into Yiddish; the first one, entitled *Bovo-Buch*, dates back to the first decade of the sixteenth century and is one of the oldest testimonies of Yiddish literature (Bikard 2012, 33). Both works consist of around seven hundred *ottava rima* stanzas each: that was the first time this stylistic pattern was used in German literature. Levita's Yiddish works grounded in Romance literature display the use of grotesque and burlesque elements. This peculiarity is closely related to the inversion of traditional values which is generally associated with Carnival expressions and which was cherished by most Italian sixteenth-century literati, Christian and Jewish (ibid.).

Northern Italian Hebrew manuscripts abound with *Purimspielen* or *Purim-Shpil* plays in *ottava rima*, the best-known possibly being Mordekhay Dato's *Istoria de Purim* (The Account of *Purim*), dating to the second half of the sixteenth century (see Busi 1987; English translation in Tennen 2008). This can be deemed as a significant intercultural phenomenon: plays which were performed during the Jewish festival of *Purim*, followed the patterns of theatrical performances common among Christians, and we should not forget that many Renaissance comedies *all'antica*, like Ludovico Ariosto's (1474-1533) ones, were performed during the pre-Lent period. Indeed, *Purimspiel* productions seem to have been performed already in the twelfth century (Davidson 1907, 123-5; 264-5), when the humorous parody of the *Book of Esther* started enjoying popularity. An interesting and influential example of such a reading, common in Italian communities, is the fourteenth-century Kalonymos ben Kalonymos's *Massekhet Purim* (The Treatise of *Purim*) (Davidson 1907, 115-34) in which the traditional Midrashic interpretation of the Bible is used to provide a comic explanation of contemporary events. However, being the *Purim* festival grounded in the persecution of ancient Persian Jews – *Purimspielen* could also be (and are still to these days) charged with epic and tragic connotations.

A *Purimspiel* can consist of a poetic monologue, or a story performed by several actors – usually the story of Esther, but also the selling of Joseph, Hannah and Samuel, or David and Goliath. As said, the habit of taking biblical stories to stage for a large audience is reminiscent of the Christian sacred representations. However, the osmotic society of sixteenth-century Italy made it possible to portray biblical characters as classical or contemporary figures of the *commedia dell'arte*, and in many *Purimspielen*, for instance, King Ahasuerus was represented as a sort of Jewish *Pantalone*. As we will see later on, in the case of Leone de' Sommi, characters of the non-Jewish comedies *all'antica* merge into biblical figures.

A solemn kind of *Purimspiel*, entirely in Hebrew, is well represented by the third-rime poem titled *Yašir Mošeh* (Moses Will Sing) by Mošeh Kohen of Corfu (see Shmeruk 1971 and Lelli 2007). The long late sixteenth-century composition<sup>6</sup> was recited in front of the Jewish congregation on the Sabbath that precedes the celebration of *Purim* (*Šabbat zakhor*), when the festivity is introduced by the obligation of remembering evil Amalek, the legendary ancestor of Haman. The Corfiot author tells extensively the story of the biblical heroine, the Queen of Persia, by drawing upon phrases that are fully derived from the Scripture and from the most common Rabbinic interpretations of the *Megillah* (the *Scroll of Esther*), and especially those contained in the homonymous treatise of the *Babylonian Talmud* and in the

<sup>6</sup> The poem was first published in Mantua in 1612; see Lelli 2007, 100-1.

*Midraš Esther Rabbah*. The poet aims to address his audience in a clear language, by blending different stylistic patterns.<sup>7</sup> The scenic purpose of the composition appears from the very first tercets, when the author calls his audience's attention by stressing the action with frequent dialogues (1-12):

[The event] took place in King Ahasuerus' days,  
Who listened to Haman's words,  
And watered us with poison and absinthe.

It was him who, forging lethal tools, plotted  
Persecution and massacre, calamity and murder,  
But fell trapped into the net he had disguised.

"These people scattered like cumin, like wild fennel",  
So said he to him, "whose faith is different, now I will rise  
And, if you allow me, I will annihilate them for ever.

Indeed I will wipe out every living being  
Among them, should this please you,  
I will destroy them, they will never rise again".

Even in his lexical choice, the poet adheres to the biblical text, by stressing images that awake the listeners' attention and make the action highly dramatic. Haman's direct discourse, which is shaped after the third chapter of the *Book of Esther*, acquires a solemn gravity compared to the biblical model. The rhythm of each verse creates a narrative continuity over the 428 tercets of the Hebrew hymn. Moses of Corfu deliberately uses Dante's iambic hendecasyllable (see Bregman 1992), paralleling the contemporaneous revival of this verse for classical theatre.

The above-mentioned tendency of Italian Jews to adopt literary genres from the non-Jewish society (see Lelli 2004b), may explain the development of the specific interest by Italian Jews in non-Jewish scenic activities. Thus, despite the Rabbinic rules against theatre, seen as a place of promiscuous encounters and contamination with diverse non-Jewish religious cultures,<sup>8</sup> Italian Jews stressed the primeval origin of sacred representations in the Bible, and especially in the *Book of Job* (see Leone de' Sommi 1968, 13-4). Between the first and the second decade of the sixteenth century, Yosef ben Šemu'el Šarfati (?-1527) translated from Castilian into Hebrew Fernando de Rojas' *La Celestina*<sup>9</sup> and, by the end of the sixteenth century, Terence's play *Eunuchus* was printed in the holy language in Mantua, as well as a *Ma'aseh*

<sup>7</sup> See Hebrew original in Lelli 2007, 104-5 (translation mine).

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., *Bab. Talm. 'Avodah Zarah* 18b, where mention is made of the sacrifices offered in theatres to pagan gods.

<sup>9</sup> Only the introduction of Šarfati's translation has come down to us: Cassuto (1935) highlights that this could have been "the first comedy in Hebrew".

*Yosef* (*The Story of Joseph*, apparently a dramatization of the biblical narrative, now lost – see Schirmann 1979, 47-8; 54; Leone de' Sommi 1988, 21). In this perspective, Yohanan Alemanno's views can be compared with those of the main representative of the Renaissance Jewish theatrical development, the Mantuan Yehudah ben Yiṣḥaq Portaleone, also known as Leone de' Sommi (1525-1592) (on whom, see below). In his Hebrew comedy, which will be described in detail later on, De' Sommi lets a personification of Wisdom introduce his play by the following words:

Now some playwrights among the gentiles have looked down upon the Jews because they seem to lack this literary facility. It is for this reason that I have this day resolved to show that the Hebrew language is not inferior to its artistic power. Indeed what is a crowning glory for other languages is but a glitter of a shoe-buckle for Hebrew. Hence, men should not deem it a defect in that language because they have not seen it cast, ere now, into a pleasing comedy. Rather, it is because the words that constitute this holy tongue are of most ancient and wondrous origin, and it has seemed unworthy for such sacred words to be said solely for human pleasure. But what other languages can do, Hebrew can do better. The very proof of this statement I shall soon place before your eyes. For if the play form is novel for Hebrew, its capacity for creating parables and proverbs is well-known, and so can make it even more marvelous as a medium for theatrical entertainment. (Leone de' Sommi 1988, 68)

As secular entertainment began to replace performances on religious themes, and all the more so throughout the sixteenth century, Jews of talent were more and more requested as actors, dancers, and musicians. Indeed, the role played by Jewish actors is well known already for the fifteenth century (Leone de' Sommi 1988, 16). We have evidence of costume performances of biblical episodes that were requested from the Jewish communities by the local Italian rulers, and especially on the occasion of wedding ceremonies. For instance, in Pesaro in 1475 Jewish actors were hired for the wedding of Costanzo Sforza and Camilla Marzano d'Aragona to stage a pantomime of the encounter of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon (see *Le Nozze di Costanzo Sforza* 1946; Sparti 2011, 240). A few years later, in 1489, and again in Pesaro, the community enacted the apocryphal story of Judith and Holofernes<sup>10</sup> in the framework of the nuptial celebrations for Giovanni Sforza, Costanzo's son, and Maddalena Gonzaga. In Northern Italy many actors were Jewish. In 1520 Ercole Gonzaga of Man-

<sup>10</sup> Even though not included in the Hebrew Scriptural canon, the *Book of Judith* was widely known among Jews and especially appreciated in fifteenth century-Italy: see Lelli 2004b, 62-6.

tua invited two Jewish players, Solomon and Jacob, from Ferrara to perform at court. In 1549 a Jewish company presented a comedy at the wedding of Duke Francesco III in Mantua. In 1563 a troupe comprised mainly of Jews presented Ludovico Ariosto's *Suppositi* (the comedy of the *Supposes*) at the Gonzaga court to honour the visit of two archdukes of Austria (Leone de' Sommi 1988, 16-7). In 1568 a troupe mainly composed of Jews performed *Le Due Fulvie* (The Two Fulvias) by the local playwright Massimo Faroni. In 1583 they staged the comedy *Gli Ingiusti Sdegni* (The Unfair Disdains) by Bernardino Pino with dances by the Jewish ballet master, Isacchino Massarano (on whom, see Sparti 2011, 245). Under Dukes Guglielmo and Vincenzo I Gonzaga, Jews were required to perform almost annually. Jews used theatrical productions as a way of paying tribute to their patrons and also to pay their community tax (see Roth 1930, 198-9). It should be remembered that the figure of a Jewish court musician – dancer – singer and entertainer became popular from the end of the fifteenth century: the brothers Guglielmo and Giuseppe da Pesaro (the first one also known by his convert's name Giovanni Ambrosio) introduced new modes of dance imported from other European regions into Italian courts (Guglielmo Ebreo of Pesaro 1993; Sparti 2011). The musical talent of Jewish artists certainly contributed to their affirmation as actors. On the other hand, because of the mobility of the artists, musical and theatrical skills could be easily associated with Jews, who were used to frequently change residence and consequently to speak various languages, a further prerequisite for performing in front of diverse audiences. A significant evidence of such a perception of Jews in Northern Italy appears in the characterization of the Jewish protagonist of Ludovico Ariosto's *Il Negromante* (*The Necromancer*, completed in 1510 and first staged in Ferrara in 1528) (see Ansani 2016). The chief character's deeds are partly recalled for the audience's benefit by his attendant, Nibbio (Kite), at the beginning of the second act of the comedy. In a monologue, Nibbio reveals for the first time the actual name of his master, the astrologer Giacchelino or Jachelino, an Italianate diminutive of Hebrew Yehi'el. From Nibbio's words, Giacchelino is presented as a blurred figure, whose real name, homeland and religion are not understandable at first sight:<sup>11</sup>

My master, Jachelino, certainly has great confidence in himself . . . / he . . . professes to be a philosopher, / an alchemist, a doctor, an astrologer, a magician, / and even a conjurer of spirits . . . / . . . Like nomads, / we go from place to place, / and wherever he passes he leaves his imprint / like a snail or, for a more fitting comparison, / like fire or lightning; and in each place, / in order to disguise himself, / he changes his name, his dress, and his coun-

<sup>11</sup> English translation in Ariosto 1975, 116. Italian original text in Ariosto 1964, 431-2.



try. / Now he calls himself Peter, now John; now he pretends / to come from Greece, now from Egypt, now from Africa. / In reality, he's a Jew, / and he was among those who were expelled from Castile . . .

In Ariosto's comedy we witness one of the first instances of a Jewish theatrical character that appears to blend the qualities of the scornful personage of Medieval sacred representations with the stereotypes of the classical comedy. Ariosto parodies contemporary Jewish scholars that could be seen in Northern Italian cities, hired by princely courts for their astrological competences. Such a characterization was common also in the Italian Jewish society of the previous centuries, and appears, for instance, in the satirical portrayals of contemporary intellectuals by Kalonymos ben Kalonymos (in his already mentioned *Megillat Purim*) or by the latter's contemporaneous Immanuel Romano (in his *Mah̄barot 'Immanu'el* [Immanuel's Compositions]; see especially Mahberet 8).

From all this emerged a different and less solemn Judeo-Italian *Purimspiel* (see Busi 1987 and Tennen 2008) that addressed a more variegated audience than the mere Jewish community (see Steinschneider 1881-2 and Schirmann 1964). We know, for instance, from Marin Sanudo's journals that on March 4th 1531, on the day following *Purim*, "there was performed among the Jews in the 'Geto' [the Venetian ghetto] a very fine comedy; but no Christian could attend by order of the Council of Ten. It ended at ten o'clock at night". This was almost certainly an annual event, which gentiles must have attended in earlier years, thus arousing the disapproval of the city authorities (see Roth 1930, 199).

We have observed the success of the Mantuan community's theatre. This was largely due to the skills of the already mentioned Leone de' Sommi,<sup>12</sup> who wrote several comedies (as well as pastoral dramas, and interludes – see Belkin 1986) in Italian, of which only a few survive in manuscript.<sup>13</sup> De' Sommi was a *yešivah* teacher and, due to his outstanding education, he became the secretary of the important Mantuan Academy "of the *Invaghiti*" (the Lovesick), and enjoyed great fame all over Europe as an impresario at the Gonzaga court. He is the author of the celebrated *Dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche* (Dialogues on Scenic Staging), the first ever written Italian treatise on the subject.<sup>14</sup> He is deemed to

<sup>12</sup> On Leone's life and works see Leone de' Sommi 1988, 18-20; Belkin 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Most of Leone's extant works were acquired by the Library of Turin which was almost completely destroyed by fire in 1904. There survives today *Hirifile*, and *Le tre sorelle* (The Three Sisters), besides fragments of other comedies. Leone's Hebrew play reached us in many different manuscript copies. See Leone de' Sommi 1988, 19-20; Leone de' Sommi 1990.

<sup>14</sup> Composed around 1565; see Leone de' Sommi 1968.

be the author of the very first Hebrew comedy extant to this day in the history of Jewish literature. In 1931 Haim Schirmann discovered and attributed to De' Sommi this comedy (Schirmann 1931; Leone de' Sommi 1946). The title of the play is *Šahut Bediquta de-Qiddušin*, an Aramaic formula that can be translated literally as “an eloquent farce [i.e. comedy] on wedding” and that has been recently published in an English version by Alfred Golding as *A Comedy of Betrothal* (Leone de' Sommi 1988). De' Sommi's play follows the stylistic patterns of contemporary non-Jewish theatre *all'antica* (e.g. the five act-division, the location of the action in a *piazza* before the houses of the three main characters), but its plot results from the adaptation of traditional motifs inspired by the Scripture and Rabbinic literature, as in the *Purimspiel* genre. Indeed, the author takes the move from Midrashic themes that widely circulated also in Medieval literature (see, e.g., *Tanḥuma Lekh Lekha* 8, *Bab. Talmud Gittin* 8b, 29a and their multiple interpretations in the thirteenth-century *Sefer Ḥasidim* [Book of the Pious] or Immanu'el Romano's *Maḥbarot Immanu'el*), but merges this sub-text into the plot of contemporary comedies, such as Ludovico Ariosto's *Lena*. The moral connotation of the Midrashic subject was possibly chosen also for its parallels with the Christian Counterreformation trends that meant to reduce the too sensual aspects of Renaissance comic theatre. Such a moral intent, which would become more and more crucial in the theatrical production of the following centuries, is still tempered in De' Sommi's text: vices are blamed, hypocrisy is ridiculed, and justice is praised, although the context is a merrymaking atmosphere, which faithfully describes the contemporary habits of the Jews of the Mantuan area (whereas in later productions the relation of the literary text with real life is less apparent). The linguistic skill, that characterizes Medieval Jewish authors, appears at its best in Leone's work, where biblical and Rabbinic sentences are often provided with new bizarre meanings. To give the idea of this multilayered text, here follows Golding's English translation of the entire second scene of the fourth act, in which two young *yešivah* students appear:

JAIR. Soon, Joktan, my good friend, there will be heard in the house the sound of joy and gladness, the sound of bride and bridegroom, for our law instructor, Master Greedy, has given his youngest daughter in marriage to a certain highly esteemed and honourable man of substance in the community.

JOKTAN. When will we begin to trip the light fantastic and otherwise have a gay old time?

JAIR. On this very day, old fellow. Let's hope that his son-in-law will proclaim in the words of the prophet Micah, “And they shall learn . . . no more,” since Master Greedy will be occupied and won't be able to keep an eye on us.

JOKTAN. May it be the Lord's will! Amen. What I'm really worried about is that our Master will impose extra assignments on us to solve problems and otherwise provide answers to his legal questions. You know as well as I that for the entire month just past we have done absolutely no study at all and have forgotten whatever we have learned.

JAIR. With words like these I can keep him happy. For I already have a question to stump all the experts on Jewish Law<sup>15</sup> when they try to provide an answer. In the scroll<sup>16</sup> commemorating the Feast of Esther it is written: "And they hung Haman".<sup>17</sup> Yet in the chapter dealing with Balak<sup>18</sup> it is definitely written, "And the children of Israel consumed the manna"<sup>19</sup> - that is, in Hebrew "Ha-Man, Ha . . . man - Haman" So how could the Jews, who had been commanded not to eat carrion, eat Ha-Man, then eat from the body of the hanged Haman?

JOKTAN. That one I'm up on. The answer that Rabbi Bilaam, the son of Rabbi Bibi, quoting his father, gave was: "What says the Torah? - 'And they consumed the manna', that is, Ha-Man . . . Haman." That serves notice on us that in the merry time of *Purim*, the feast of Esther, we are expected to eat sweet cakes made of fine flour and oil, and ever after they are to be known by Haman's name.<sup>20</sup> So it may always be said that the taste of manna was like the honeycake.<sup>21</sup>

JAIR. A fine explanation originating from Rabbi Bibi of blessed memory.

JOKTAN. You'll see that our good teacher will be satisfied with the way we solve these tricky questions, even if our answer is not strictly kosher.<sup>22</sup> But what I'm really frightened about is that he'll take it into his head to have us compose and learn by heart some long speech praising the bride and groom, so that we may deliver it at the wedding banquet. In that case we'll spend our time just looking at the fancy dishes without being able to eat them.

JAIR. May such a disaster never befall us! Ever! But look! I believe I have a way to get us out of that terrible situation.

JOKTAN. From whence comes our help?

JAIR. I shall let it be known that I have a headache and have taken to my bed.

<sup>15</sup> The Halakhah, or Rabbinic law.

<sup>16</sup> He is referring to the Megillah, the most common name of the *Book of Esther*.

<sup>17</sup> Est. 7:10.

<sup>18</sup> This biblical section (Num. 22:2-25:9) has nothing to do with the episode of the manna. Maybe the author hints at the Rabbinic connection between Haman and the pseudo-prophet Balaam that appears in this biblical section and is later recalled by Joktan in the name of "Rabbi Bilaam".

<sup>19</sup> Ex. 16:25.

<sup>20</sup> Joktan is referring to "Haman's ears" or *Hamantaschen*: see below.

<sup>21</sup> Ex. 16:25.

<sup>22</sup> The use of this term is ambiguous, as it literally means 'fit [according to religious law]' and is generally referred to food, which is what interests more the two interlocutors.

JOKTAN. I also thought of pulling such a stunt. But on second thought I realized that if I acted like that I still would not be allowed to enjoy myself by sampling the pastries and dainties that are sure to be piled high upon the table. I really would suffer then, if I were deprived of such wonderful foodstuff!

JAIR. There's none smarter than you in anticipating what might happen. Let's think of another remedy for our difficulty, so that we will not have to endure punishment, should this calamity strike us.

JOKTAN. Lo and behold, the Master is leaving the house!

JAIR. I'm getting out of here fast.

JOKTAN. And I'm already out of sight!<sup>23</sup>

In this lively dialogue we can feel the dense rhythm of the dialectic exchange or debate of a Talmudic academy,<sup>24</sup> that here is alluded to in parody. The purely speculative question suggested by Jair is built on the traditional hermeneutic rules that allow the interpreters of the Hebrew Scripture to compare two different biblical passages in which the same word (or even a homophone) occurs (the so-called *gezerah šawah*): in this case, Jair remarks that the Hebrew word for *manna* sounds exactly like Haman, the name of the evil enemy of the people of Israel in the *Book of Esther*. According to Rabbinic rules, then, the two terms have to be interpreted in close connection. But here arises another major issue concerning *kašrut*, or dietary law. The apparent conundrum can be solved in a paradoxical way, by hinting at the traditional *Purim* dessert, generally known to this day by the Yiddish term *Hamantasche*: the biblical honey cakes then are nothing but the 'Haman's ears' of the Jewish cuisine. Higher forms of exegesis are reduced to daily issues by two greedy *yešivah* students who target all their juridical knowledge to food. Of special significance in this context is the name of the students' teacher, Hamdan, which can be translated 'Greedy'. The overall situation is hilarious and allows the audience to set the whole action in the framework of the joyous feast of *Purim* which was very likely the time of the year when the play was staged.

Characters are designed according to the categories of classical theatre: young men whose only aim is to satisfy their appetites and escape their duties. Jair adapts the biblical verse from the prophetic *Book of Micah* "neither shall they learn war any more" to his own expectations, by omitting the word 'war'. Even the English translation of the dialogue allows the modern reader to perceive the constant reference of the author to the Bible: a case in point is the expression "From whence comes our help?", an evident hint at Ps. 121:1.

<sup>23</sup> Leone de' Sommi 1988, 107-8. Hebrew original in Leone de' Sommi 1946, 220-2.

<sup>24</sup> On the centrality of *yešivah* education in Renaissance Italian Jewish society, see Bonfil 1993, 17-27.

By and large, the parody of the Scripture as well as of the most traditional forms of Jewish education represents the real innovation of Leone's Hebrew comedy. Its manifest meaning can be fully understandable only to a Jewish audience who is well trained in the contemporary patterns of non-Jewish comic theatre, as well as its more hidden message, that the utter study of the *Torah* and the Rabbinic literature can result either in the authentic knowledge of God or in the mere achievements of mundane goods.

The intent of letting Jewish audiences fully understand the most profound moral meanings of the Scripture according to new literary genres was sought also by Italian Jewish authors of tragedies. For instance, the Venetian Leon Modena (Yehudah Aryeh of Modena, 1571-1648), possibly the best-known Italian Rabbi of the Renaissance, in the introduction to the edition of his *L'Ester: Tragedia tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura* (Esther, A Tragedy Drawn from the Holy Scripture)<sup>25</sup> states that he composed his drama in order to establish a closer relation between "Rabbinic interpretations, called *Midrašim* by the Jews" and "the gravity . . . requested by tragedies and heroic holiest narrations" (Leon Modena 1619, 9-10). Modena's only extant play is introduced by the character of Truth, who remarks that the author's intent to draw upon Midrashic material aims at the "greater delight of the learned" and is motivated by "truthfulness of the matter" (Leon Modena 1619, 10). Published in Venice on the day of *Purim* 1619, Modena's drama was the revised version of a 1558 *Purimspiel* by the Portuguese former convert Salomón Usque (see Roth 1930, 199; Zavan 2004. See also Canals Piñas 2001), later elaborated by the Venetian Eli'ezer di Graziano Levi, Modena's maternal uncle. Usque and Levi's work had enjoyed such a good reception<sup>26</sup> that its several performances were attended by both Jews and Christians (Zavan 2004, 121-2; Arbib 2003, 112). The moral goals of Leone's tragedy appear, for instance, in his sympathetic portrayal of Queen Vashti, who follows contemporary melodramatic patterns. In the fourth scene of the first act, Vashti laments the tragic fate that befell her, right at the time when she was "living merrily in a high state":

Well, may I bemoan Nature, a mother / to others, and to us a cruel  
step-mother, / doing such harm to us in making us women, / Ah feminine  
sex, unfortunate sex, / born into the world only as a target / for all the tragic  
blows struck / by this, which I call death and the world [calls] life; / sex  
that receives only sorrows / and misery and misfortunes in any degree, / In

<sup>25</sup> Modena's *Ester* was published by Giacomo Sarzina's Venetian press in 1619, but its composition dated back to 1613: see Piattelli 1968, 163.

<sup>26</sup> According to some scholars, the original drama was written in Spanish, while others hold it was composed in Italian: see Roth 1930, 199; Zavan 2004, 120-3.

whatever condition she be born, [whether] low / or in a high situation . . .  
(Arbib 2003, 124)

In the seventeenth century, Italian Jewish theatre was deeply influenced by the presence of *converso*-born authors who drew inspiration for their dramas from Iberian *autos sacramentales*. Such theatrical forms were introduced to Italian communities mainly by playwrights who came from the Netherlands.<sup>27</sup> The Amsterdam-born Mošeh ben Mordekhay Zacuto (1620s?-1697) descended from a family of former *converso* Jews. After moving to Italy, where he lived in Verona, Padua, Venice and Mantua, around 1640 he wrote the drama *Yesod 'Olam* (The Pillar of the World), which takes the move from Midrashic re-readings of Abraham's deeds from the *Book of Genesis* (see Zacuto 2016, 21-5). Before the discovery of De' Sommi's play, this was deemed to be the first drama extant to this day ever composed in Hebrew. The author maintained the three unities – of plot, time, and place – of classical theatre but the play, possibly composed for *Purim*, consists only of lengthy poetic monologues (Zacuto 1875; Melkman 1967). Even the best-known poem by Zacuto, *Tofteh 'Arukh* (Hell Set, or A Description of Hell), seemingly inspired by Dante's *Comedy*, is divided in acts and belies a strong influence of contemporary Spanish theatre (see Zacuto 2016, 21-5). In the context of the then flourishing Venetian academies, Šimḥah ben Abraham Calimani (1699-1784) composed a drama influenced by contemporary pastoral plays:<sup>28</sup> his three-act *Qol Šimḥah* (A Voice of Joy or Simḥah's Voice) features only moral virtues and vices. His better-known contemporaneous Mošeh Ḥayyim ben Ya'aqov Luzzatto (aka Ramḥal, 1707-1746/47), well versed in all fields of literature and thought, composed at least three Hebrew dramas: *Ma'ašeh Šimšon* (Samson's Deeds) centres upon the conflict between sensual love and religious and civic duties; besides biblical characters, four allegoric virtues appear in his three-act play; *Migdal 'Oz* (Powerful Tower), in three acts, elaborates upon the traditional metaphorical story of a princess that will marry the first man who will be able to enter her father's private garden. Young Šalom (Peace) succeeds, but is cheated by Zifa (Deceit) and only after many trials he manages to marry Šelomit. Luzzatto's drama follows in the footsteps of Torquato Tasso's *Aminta* and Giovan Battista Guarini's Pastor *fido*, but rereads their pastoral setting according to contemporary Kabbalistic doctrines. The last and most celebrated Luzzatto's three-act drama is titled *La-Yešarim Tehillah* (Praise to the

<sup>27</sup> On these dramatic productions, see El Macabeo 2006; Gomez 2007.

<sup>28</sup> See Schirmann 1979, 54-94. See also Belkin 1986. Leon Modena wrote a pastoral play on Rachel and Jacob and his pupil Benedetto Luzzatto composed the pastoral drama *L'amor possente* (Powerful Love): see Roth 1930, 199. On Jewish participation in Venetian academies, see Veltri and Chajes 2018.

Righteous) and features only moral representations of vices and virtues. Luzzatto's praise of faith and moral reason echoes the contemporary values expressed by Arcadian melodrama.<sup>29</sup> Jewish playwrights and actors greatly contributed to the development of Italian theatre throughout the Modern era: their artistic activity was still highly praised in the nineteenth century when Jewish Dramatic Societies flourished in several Northern Italian cities.<sup>30</sup>

## Works Cited

- Ansani, Antonella. 2016. "Questioning Poetry in Ariosto's *Negromante*". *NorthEast Modern Language Association (NEMLA) Italian Studies* 38: 67-99.
- Arbib, Marina. 2003. "The Queen Esther's Triangle. Leon Modena, Ansaldo Cebà, and Sara Copio Sullam". In *The Lion Shall Roar. Leon Modena and His World*, edited by David Malkiel, 103-13. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University - Ben-Zvi Institute.
- Ariosto, Ludovico. 1975. *The Comedies of Ariosto*. Translated by Edmond M. Beame and Leonard G. Sbrocchi. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- 1964. *Opere minori*. Edited by Aldo Vallone. Milano: Rizzoli.
- Belkin, Ahuva. 1997. *Leone de' Sommi and the Performing Arts*. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University.
- 1986. "Leone de' Sommi's Pastoral Conception and the Design of the Shepherds' Costumes for the Mantuan Production of Guarini's *Il Pastor Fido*". *Assaph: Studies in Theater* 3: 59-74.
- Bikard, Arnaud. 2012. "Elia Levita's Yiddish Works. Echoes of the Italian Renaissance in the Poetical Creation of a Jewish Humanist". In *Jewish Migration: Voices of the Diaspora*, edited by Raniero Spelman, Monica Jansen, and Silvia Gaiga, *Italianistica Ultraiectina* 7: 32-39.
- Bonfil, Robert. 1994. *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 1993. *Rabbis and Jewish Communities in Renaissance Italy*. London and Washington: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization.
- Bregman, Dvora. 1992. "Shifting Trends in the Style of Hebrew Italian Poetry". *Tarbiz* 61: 505-27 (Hebrew).
- Busi, Giulio. 1987. *La Istoria de Purim Io Ve Racconto... Il Libro di Ester secondo un rabbino emiliano del Cinquecento*. Rimini: Luisè Editore.
- Canals Piñas, Jorge. 2001. *Salomón Usque: traductor del Canzoniere de Petrarca*. Ph.D. Thesis. Barcelona: Universidad Autónoma.
- Cassuto, Umberto. 1935. "From Josef ben Samuel Tsarfati's Poems: the First Comedy in Hebrew". In *Studies in Memory of George A. Kohut*, edited by Salo W.

<sup>29</sup> See Luzzatto 1972; Rathaus 1989; Tamani 2004, 216-20.

<sup>30</sup> See Roth 1930, 200.



- Baron and Alexander Marx 121-28 (Hebrew). New York: The Alexander Koth Memorial Foundation.
- Davidson, Israel. 1907. *Parody in Jewish Literature*. New York: The Columbia University Press.
- Ducharte, Pierre L. 1966. *The Italian Comedy*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Gomez, Antonio Henrique. 2007. *Sansón Nazareno / Poema heroico*. Edited by Moshe Lazar. Los Angeles: Labyrinthos.
- Guglielmo Ebreo of Pesaro. 1993. *De pratica seu arte tripudii / On the Practice or Art of Dancing*. Edited by Barbara Sparti. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Gurney, Tessa C. 2015. "Performing the Mediterranean in Giovan Battista Andreini's *Lo Schiavetto*". In *The Medici and the Levant: Interlacing Cultures from Florence to the Eastern Mediterranean, (1532-1743)*, edited by Marta Caroscio and Maurizio Arfaioi, 120-45. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Lelli, Fabrizio. 2007. "Influenze italiane sulla poesia liturgica corfiota". *Materia giudaica* 12 (1-2): 99-114.
- 2004a. "Biography and Autobiography in Yohanan Alemanno's Literary Perception". In *Cultural Intermediaries. Jewish Intellectuals in Early Modern Italy*, edited by David B. Ruderman and Giuseppe Veltri, 25-38. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- 2004b. "Jews, Humanists, and the Reappraisal of Pagan Wisdom, Associated with the Conception of *Dignitas Homini*". In *Hebraica Veritas? Christian Hebraists and The Study of Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Allison P. Coudert and Jeffrey S. Shoulson, 49-70. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Leon Modena. 1619. *L'Ester: Tragedia tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura*. Venezia: Giacomo Sarzina.
- 1946. *Šahut bediquta de-qiddušin*. Edited by Jefim Schirmann. Yerušalayim: Taršiš (Hebrew).
- Leone de' Sommi. 1990. "L'Irifile (ms. 1570s?)". In *L'Irifile e la cultura letteraria di Leone De' Sommi (con un'edizione critica del testo)*, edited by Giuseppe Dalla Palma. *Schifanoia* 9: 139-225.
- 1988. *A Comedy of Betrothal (Tsaioth B'dihutha D'Kiddushin)*. Translated by Alfred S. Golding. Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions.
- 1968. *Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche*. Edited by Ferruccio Marotti. Milano: Il Polifilo.
- Lesley, Arthur M. 1992. "Jewish Adaptation of Humanist Concepts in Fifteenth and Sixteenth-Century Italy". In *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, edited by David B. Ruderman, 45-62. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- 1976. *The 'Song of Solomon's Ascents' by Yohanan Alemanno: Love and Human Perfection according to a Jewish Associate of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*. Ph.D. Diss. Berkeley: University of California.
- Luzzatto, Mošeh Ḥayyim. 1972. *Ha-maḥazot šel Mošeh Ḥayyim Luzzatto*. Edited by Yonah David. Yerušalayim: Mossad Bialik.
- El Macabeo. Poema Heroico*. 2006. Edited by Moshe Lazar. Los Angeles: Labyrinthos.



- Melkman, Joseph. 1967. "Moshe Zaccuto's Play 'Yesod 'Olam'". *Studia Rosenthaliana* 1 (2): 1-26.
- Newbegin, Nerida. 2014. "Feo Belcari's Rappresentazione di Abramo". In *Phalaris's Epistolae: Adventures of a Florentine Incunabulum*. London: The Electronic British Library Journal. <http://www.bl.uk/ebj/2014articles.html>
- and Barbara Wisch. 2012. *Acting on Faith: The Confraternity of the Gonfalone in Renaissance Rome*. Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press.
- Nicoll, Allardyce. 1927. *The Development of the Theatre: A Study of Theatrical Art from the Beginnings to the Present Day*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Nozze (Le) di Costanzo Sforza e Camilla d'Aragona celebrate a Pesaro nel maggio 1475; narrazione anonima, accompagnata da 32 miniature di artista contemporaneo*. 1946. Edited by Tammaro De Marinis. Firenze: Vallecchi.
- Piattelli, Angelo A. 1968. "'Ester': l'unico dramma di Leon da Modena giunto fino a noi". *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 34 (3): 163-172.
- Rathaus, Ariel. 1989. "Hebrew Pastoral Poetry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century". *Italia Judaica*, 3, 111-20 (Hebrew). Rome: Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali.
- Roth, Cecil. 1930. *History of Jews in Venice*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America.
- Schirmann, Hayyim. 1979. *Studies in the History of Hebrew Poetry and Drama*. 2, Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik (Hebrew).
- 1964. "Theatre and Music in the Italian Ghetti between the 16th and 18th Centuries". *Zion* 39: 61-111 (Hebrew).
- Schirmann, Jefim. 1931. "Eine hebräisch-italienische Komödie des XVI Jahrhunderts". *Monatschrift für die Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 75: 97-118.
- Shmeruk, Chone. 1971. "Purim-Shpil." In *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem, 13, coll. 1396-1404.
- Sparti, Barbara. 2011. "Jewish Dancing-Master and 'Jewish Dance' in Renaissance Italy. Guglielmo Ebreo and Beyond". In *Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance*, edited by Judith Brin Ingher, 235-50. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Steinschneider, Moritz. 1881-82. "Purim und Parodie". *Israelitische Letterbode* 7: 1-13; 8 (1883-84): 45-58.
- Tamani, Giuliano. 2004. *La letteratura ebraica medievale (secoli X-XVIII)*. Brescia: Morcelliana.
- Tennen, Debra. 2008. "Megillat Ester in Ottava Rima. Mordecai Dato's Poetry Regarding Sixteenth-Century Italian Jewish Women". *Renaissance Studies* 22 (4): 507-541.
- Veltri, Giuseppe, and Evelien Chajes. 2016. *Oltre le mura del ghetto. Accademie, scetticismo e tolleranza nella Venezia barocca*. Palermo: New Digital Press.
- Zacuto, Mošeh. 2016. *L'inferno allestito. Poema di un rabbino del Seicento sull'oltretomba dei malvagi*. Edited and translated by Michela Andreatta. Milano: Bompiani.
- 1874. *Jesod Holam. Dramma ebraico pubblicato per cura di D.ḥ. Maroni*. Livorno: Israel Costa.
- Zavan, Gabriella. 2004. *Gli ebrei, i marrani e la figura di Salomon Usque*. Treviso: Editrice Santi Quaranta.

MICHELA ANDREATTA\*

## Piety on Stage: Popular Drama and the Public Life of Early Modern Jewish Confraternities

Abstract

In the summer of 1720, in the ghetto of Ferrara, the members of the devotional confraternity *Hadashim la-bekarim* (Daily Renewal) organized and staged public readings of Moses Zacuto's dramatic poem *Tofteh 'arukh* (Hell Arrayed). The readings, which were held after midnight and included musical accompaniment by an instrumental ensemble, afforded the opportunity for the entire community to channel religious and aesthetical impulses into a public ritual of devotion, while supplying the members of the confraternity a platform from which to popularize both their rites and the underlying learned culture. The Ferrara readings were by no means an isolated phenomenon. Marking the observance of liturgical feasts with the organization of sometimes elaborate events, in which ritual enactment and entertainment were combined, was a staple of Jewish confraternal life in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italy. These performances, most of which were at the semi-professional or amateur level, went from dramatized readings to cantatas, to small oratorios, and often involved purportedly composed Hebrew poetry of considerable literary merit. By reconstructing the commissioning, performance, and audience reception of some of these works, this essay explores the ways in which devotional confraternities and akin groups used dramatic and music poetry to promote confraternal rituals and gain new visibility, thus also contributing to reshape the public sphere inside the ghetto.

KEYWORDS: Early Modern Italy; Jewish devotional confraternities; Hebrew poetry for music; Hebrew dramatic poetry; Immanuel Frances; Moses Zacuto

### 1. Nocturnal Rituals

It is an August night in the ghetto of Ferrara, in 1720. The hour is past midnight and people are gathering again to attend the dramatized reading of *Tofteh 'arukh* (Hell Arrayed), the dark, wildly imaginative poem on the afterlife fate of the wicked by the late Mantuan rabbi Moses Zacuto (c. 1625-1697).<sup>1</sup> For three weeks, between the fast days of the seventeenth of Tam-

<sup>1</sup> A renowned follower and practitioner of Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism, a revered legal scholar and an extraordinarily accomplished poet in Hebrew, Moses ben Mordecai Zacuto was born in Amsterdam in the first decade of the 17th century into a fam-

\* University of Rochester - michelaandreatta@rochester.edu

muz and the ninth of Av (two penitential holidays commemorating the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem by the Romans), the members of the local confraternity of watchers, called *Ḥadashim la-bekarim* (Daily Renewal), have been holding the readings daily, night after night, in front of an engrossed audience, spellbound by Zacuto's entrancing verse. At one time beguiled and horrified by the poem's morbid subject, the assembled crowd are not just passive spectators of a performance; rather, they actively participate in its production: together with the members of the confraternity, they chant in choir the hymns at the end of the reading, thus amplifying the auditory effect of the performance while also actualizing its liturgical purpose. Night after night, the audience is transported into the tenebrous world of Zacuto's poem: they stand at the deathbed of the unfortunate protagonist witnessing the fatal moment of his demise, they feel the claustrophobic enclosure of the tomb and the rotting and eating of the decaying flesh, they contemplate the aberrant landscape of hell, in which an indistinct mass of men, women, and children are enduring gruesome physical torments at the hands of a hoard of monstrous demons. Like the poem's dead protagonist, they are been judged and found guilty, and in view of their sins, embark upon an hallucinatory descent through the seven pits of hell, until they reach the floor of the deepest one – a dark and filthy receptacle into which all the uncleanness of the upper pits trickles down. From the depths of hell, looking up, they catch a brief glimpse of the divine light radiating from heaven; admonished to recognize the theological truth of hell, they are eventually exhorted to repent before their earthly life reaches its end. As the poem's potent narration unfolds, the spectators gathered in the Ferrara ghetto are bound for an immersive and transporting experience, in which the familiar space of the Jewish neighbourhood yields to the transcendent world of sin, punishment, and damnation conjured up by the reading. The nocturnal setting, whose atmosphere is intensified by the flickering light of torches and candles, and the musical accom-

ily of *converso* descent. After a period spent studying at *yeshivas* in Eastern Europe, he moved to Italy, and from 1644 was active in Venice. In the city on the lagoon, he served the community in the ghetto as a rabbi, preacher, and teacher for almost thirty years, while at the same time working in the local Hebrew printing houses as editor and proofreader. Summoned by the Mantuan community to serve as their rabbi, in 1673, Zacuto moved to the city of the Gonzagas, where he remained until his death, in 1697. A vast bibliography has been devoted to his personality and intellectual production, which the following list does not intend to exhaust: Simonsohn 1977, 738-41; Schirmann 1979, 2.125-38; Pagis 1986, 28-33, 225-38; Benayahu 1988; Bonfil 2001; Bregman 2006; Bregman 2009. To Zacuto and some aspects of his work is devoted the monographic issue of *Pe'amim* 96 (2003). Further bibliography will be provided in the following of this article.

paniment of an instrumental ensemble, all enhance the theatrical dimension of the event. Accurately produced and collectively staged, this drama of piety allows the crowd in attendance to release religious feelings such as fear, contrition, and repentance, while channelling their aesthetic impulses into a public ritual of devotion. As for the members of the confraternity, the ceremonial setting of the readings gives them the opportunity to exert their agency by producing an event in which both the group's individual voice is being heard and the community's collective identity displayed. Altogether, the hosting of the performances provides the *Ḥadashim la-bekarim* a flexible, at one time approachable and solemn platform from which to popularize their rituals and the learned culture underlying them.

Marking the observance of liturgical feasts with the organization of sometimes elaborate events in which ritual enactment and entertainment were combined was a staple of Jewish confraternal life in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italy (Schirmann 1979, 2.68-74).<sup>2</sup> The Ferrara group *Ḥadashim la-bekarim*, which was behind the public readings of Zacuto's *Tofteh 'arukh*, was dedicated to the study of Jewish traditional texts and the observance of special rituals such as the *Tikkun ḥazot* or Midnight Vigil, a nocturnal rite inspired by mystical theories, in emulation of customs originally established around mid-sixteenth century in the Jewish centres of Ottoman Palestine. In Italy the nocturnal watch, whose purpose was to commemorate the destruction of the ancient temple in Jerusalem and invoke its reestablishment, initially took form as a pre-dawn penitential ritual which rapidly spread among Jewish communities in northern and central Italy (Horowitz 1987; Horowitz 1989; Rivlin 1991, 152-5). Purportedly established groups, known as *Shomerim la-boker* (Morning Watchers) – a denomination denoting their focus of devotion – put together and customized, often with the involvement of local Hebrew *literati*, special collections of prayers and hymns to be recited during the gatherings of the groups (Benayahu 1998; Andreatta 2011). Some of these compilations were almost entirely made of newly or especially composed religious hymns, and most of them also integrated occasional poems in praise of the confraternity and its members. Their printing played a crucial role in disseminating Kabbalistic ideas and customs, as much as in tangibly advertising the sponsoring groups. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, societies of the kind *Shomerim la-boker* had become a staple of Jewish life inside the Italian ghettos, thus paving the way for the establishment of other confraternal groups, each with its own ritual specialization, such as those devoted to

<sup>2</sup> Specifically, on the role of art music in the life of Jewish devotional confraternities, see Adler 1966, 55-64 (with regards to Mantua), 65-9 (Venice), 80-2 and 111-13 (Modena), 99-100 (Verona), 110-11 (Ancona).

the above mentioned Midnight Vigil, an observance by some considered a stricter course of devotion than the Morning Watch,<sup>3</sup> and of which Zacuto had been one of the earliest adepts and promoters.

The question whether the ritual practices observed within devotional confraternities and the underlying mystical theories were the exclusive domain of narrow groups of initiated Kabbalah adepts, or if instead these confraternities had a more popular character, is still a matter of debate. The first groups of watchers were mostly created at the initiative of local personalities who engaged in Kabbalistic studies or had some connection with the Palestinian centres, and it is likely that, on the example of the mystical sodalities active in the Land of Israel, also their Italian counterparts initially envisioned confraternal life as the realm of esoteric knowledge and practice, and as the dedicated setting of hard core elitist socialization revolving around Kabbalah (Fine 2003, 76-7). Over time, the proliferation of confraternities of this kind, sometimes with more than one group of watchers operating in the same town, and the customization of their nocturnal devotions brought about the popularization of the underlying mystical beliefs and, along with it, also their demystification. As scholarly research has underscored, something similar had happened also with the parallel penetration of Kabbalistic rituals into the realms of both domestic and synagogue observance (Hallamish 2000). As a matter of fact, by mid-seventeenth century, devotional confraternities seem to have lost their exclusive nature, while extant documentation attests to a change of strategy also in the public life of these groups. Since their inception, confraternities of the kind *Shomerim la-boker* had been providing members of the middle class an important setting for the expression of religiosity and a valuable frame in which to experience sociability. They also had been affording a unique opportunity for intellectual enrichment, in which like-minded individuals, particularly followers of Kabbalah, could keep abreast of new developments and trends, have access to state-of-the-art works in the field, contribute to their circulation and engage in scholarly debates (Tishby 1974). Now, in the attempt to achieve visibility and prominence within the communal structure, devotional confraternities started to widen the range of their ac-

<sup>3</sup> A remarkable description of the rite of the vigil as practiced in the Venetian ghetto around mid-seventeenth century is included in the apologetic work *Derekh emunah: Via della fede mostrata a'gli ebrei (The Path of Faith Illustrated to the Jews)* by the Jewish convert to Catholicism Giulio Morosini (c. 1612-83), published in Rome in 1683. When describing the devotions observed by his former coreligionists, Morosini mentions two 'classes' of watchers: the first, whose rituals, as described by the author, coincide with the Midnight Vigil, are defined as "sommamente divoti" ("outmost pious"), while the second, whose members are said to belong to the *Shomerim la-boker* confraternity, are designated as "i meno divoti" ("the less pious") (Morosini 1683, 1.245).

tivities and to cater to members of the community at large by organizing public events of high visibility, not directly related to the specific rituals they observed, in which religious observance and entertainment were combined in a novel manner. In doing so, they came to carve for themselves a new, prominent role as cultural agents within the larger Jewish community. More generally, they also contributed to the reshaping of the public sphere inside the ghetto and to the redefinition of Jewish collective identity in reaction to the momentous social and intellectual transformations that were affecting Italian Jewry at the time. Thus, for example, the organization of nocturnal parades, where members of the confraternity marched through the alleys of the Jewish neighbourhood bearing torches on the occasion of liturgical feasts and communal celebrations, was not just an event of powerful visual impact and distinct theatrical nature; it was also a symbolic assertion of socio-political role and influence within a now more stratified and hierarchical Jewish community (Horowitz 2001), as well as an act of physical appropriation of the Jewish space inside the city.

## 2. Confraternal Entertainments

Celebrations held on the anniversary of foundation of a confraternity provided a similar opportunity. They typically included a banquet, but often afforded also the occasion for presenting the larger community with music performances and specially commissioned Hebrew poetry. Music composer Carlo Grossi (c. 1634-1688), who was active in Venice and the Veneto area in the second half of the seventeenth century, was commissioned the composition of a *Cantata Ebraïca in Dialogo [per] voce sola e choro by a Shomerim la-boker* confraternity (Grossi 1965; Adler 1966, 1.89-109; Pagis 1973, 206-7). From the Hebrew text of the *Cantata* (eight strophes of four hendecasyllables lines each with feminine rhyme ABBA), we learn that the piece had been commissioned on the occasion of the celebrations marking the annual anniversary of foundation of the confraternity, which, as it was the case for many of such groups, took place on the night of the Jewish holiday of *Hosha'na rabbah*. This festivity, which Italian Jews used to call the 'day of the great seal' (*yom ha-hotam ha-gadol*), marked the closure of the penitential period opening with the month of Elul and culminating on *Yom Kippur*, and hence also the final opportunity for obtaining divine forgiveness. Grossi, who was not a Hebraist, probably worked at the musical setting in collaboration with the anonymous author of the Hebrew text, who on his part was probably an affiliated of the sponsoring group. This circumstance seems to be confirmed by the punctual exposition of the purposes of the watch ("to wake with the dawn to pour [their] bitter soul in front of the Lord and thus



hasten the redemption and the coming of the Messiah” [4.2-3]),<sup>4</sup> and by the resort to technical terms and expressions typical of the language of the watchers, the same that we find deployed also in the paratextual elements of their prayer books, particularly prefaces and dedications. Grossi’s *Cantata* was constructed, as its title indicates, as a dialogue between a solo voice (‘a passerby’) and a choir (‘the companions [of the confraternity]’), allowing for the alternation of recitatives and *da capo* arias typical of this kind of musical compositions.<sup>5</sup> The relative simplicity of the choral parts indicates that they were likely intended for performance by a choir of amateur singers, probably the members of the confraternity themselves, whose musical capabilities, we may suppose, were less advanced. The solo parts, on the contrary, required the ability of a professional operatic soloist, probably somebody purposely hired for the event, whose performance, alternating with the parts sung by the confraternity’s members, was meant to bespeak the group’s standing and cultured refinement.

Acting, music, singing (and sometimes also dancing) were inextricably blended in early modern spectacles and public entertainments, and such phenomenon was particularly prominent in professional theatrical productions by Jews (Harrán 1999, 174-200). Although communal activities hosted by confraternal groups were mostly at the semi-professional or amateur level, they nevertheless tended to follow suit. Depending on the location and prestige of each group, the display of music and singing during confraternal events could reach the scale and elaborateness of full-fledged operatic productions, while the literary merit of the libretti, usually purportedly composed, was often considerable. The performance of the *cantata-quasi-oratorio Dio, Clemenza e Rigore (God, Mercy, and Severity)*, a long and complex musical piece commissioned in the 1730s by the confraternity *Zerizim* (The Zealous) in Casale Monferrato, in the Piedmont region, was one of such highly performative affairs (Adler 1992). While the name of the composer has not reached us (two of the overture-symphonies, though, have been identified as belonging to contemporary Italian repertoire), we know that the initiative to perform was taken by Joseph Hayyim Chezighin, himself a member of the confraternity, who commissioned the libretto to S.H. Jarach, a refined Hebrew poet about whom, regrettably, no more is known besides his family name. From the extant documentation it emerges that the *cantata-quasi-oratorio* was performed at least twice

<sup>4</sup> “*Lakum be-ashmoret we-lishpoch siah la-El pedut yahish we-et mashiah*”.

<sup>5</sup> For a survey of the origins of this musical genre in seventeenth-century Italy and the different connotations the term *cantata* had among contemporary poets and composers, see Rau 1999, 226-62. The term, as used by Grossi, conforms to the Venetian music practice in which it designated the setting of a strophic poem to mixed vocal styles.

to mark the anniversary of the confraternity on the night of *Hosha'ana rab-bah* in 1732 and 1733, and that Chezighin took part in the performances as *maestro di cappella* and harpsichord player. The theme of the piece aligns with the liturgical occasion it was meant for: on this last day of reckoning, a Defender (Mercy) and an Accuser (Severity) argue in front of the divine throne urging God respectively to forgive and punish mankind's sins. The dialectical confrontation between the two contenders, around which the poetic narrative revolves, and the ensuing dramatic tension are eventually resolved when God grants his final absolution, not without mentioning, in one breath, the merits "of those who study and together persevere" (*ha-lomdim ha-maḥazikim yaḥad*), an implicit allusion to the confraternity and its members. Built according to the typical pattern of Baroque cantatas with the prescribed alternation of arias and recitatives, a number of duets, and opening and concluding chorus parts, *Dio, Clemenza e Rigore* is a serious art music work the performance of which required trained singers and a professional music ensemble and whose source of inspiration lied in contemporary sacred opera. The libretti were the work of a poet who was familiar with the specific conventions of this musical genre and who, besides, was also endowed with a formidable command of the Hebrew language and the ability to put in place typical solutions of Baroque poetry. Thus, for example, the concluding duet between Mercy and Severity is built as a sequence of homophonic structures having though differing semantic meaning. The echo effect thus created not only provided the audience a remarkable auditory experience, it also engaged them intellectually and, in all probability, surprised and baffled them, while testing their discerning abilities and proficiency in the Hebrew language. The resort to echo structures, a "figure of excess" (Burgard 2019, 340-4) in which the doubling of the language instead of creating sameness of meaning disrupts it by introducing difference, was a favourite solution of contemporary poetry and, alongside metaphor, provided an apt arena in which Baroque poets could prove their mastery of artifice. Zacuto himself resorted to this sophisticated poetic device in several of his compositions, including *Tofteh 'arukh* (Bregman 2017).

This kind of productions, in which music was at the service of piety and entertainment was functional to rituality, allowed devotional confraternities to circumvent traditional rabbinical reservations against theatre, instrumental music, and recreation outside the few dedicated occasions in the Jewish calendar. This phenomenon also contributed to the rising popularity of sacred poetry for music among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Jewish poets, most of them seemingly willing not to eschew from genres and forms of undisputable Christian origin. At the time when the musical society *Accademia degli Impediti* (Academy of the Hampered) was established in the ghetto of Venice – a feat whose remarkable occurrence can



be reconstructed thanks to the testimonies of some of its members (Har-ran 1998, 53-61) – the city had a thriving music scene and was becoming the place where opera, as we know it, would assume its defining nature as a mixture of theatrical and musical entertainment available to a large and variegated audience (Rosand 1990). But also in Florence, the city where opera, with its powerful combination of drama and singing, had moved, back at the end of the sixteenth century, its first steps, Jewish *literati* were writing Hebrew poetry for music and the commission of texts to be used as the basis of musical compositions falling into the definition of cantatas or small oratorios was actually a staple of local confraternal life. Sometime around mid-seventeenth century a *Shomerim la-boker* confraternity active in the Medici's city commissioned Hebrew poet Immanuel Frances (c. 1618 – after 1710)<sup>6</sup> a 'song for Purim' (*zimrat Purim*),<sup>7</sup> meant to be performed by soloists and a chorus with the accompaniment of instrumental music (Adler 1966, 85-7). As mentioned, the joyous festivity of Purim was the only occasion on the Jewish calendar during which most rabbis did not object to theatrical and musical spectacles being performed, and, on the contrary, even encouraged them (Schirmann 1979, 2.52-63). This holiday was also customarily marked by the organization of parties and banquets, events of inherently theatrical nature which provided the ideal settings for the recitation of poems, usually of comic or satirical character, and the performance of music. While the music scores to which Frances' composition was set have not been preserved, we can reconstruct the work's structure and the function of each of its sections thanks to the title the author indicated in Italian language and Hebrew letters for each part, as extant in his autograph collection of poems: the piece included four short arias (each of them termed *arietta*), three recitatives, and two parts for chorus. The alternation of freely rhymed verses of septenaries and hendecasyllables in the recitative parts and regularly rhymed strophic arias displays Frances' familiarity with the specific conventions governing the genre of the cantata in both its poetic and musical components.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> A native of Livorno, Immanuel Frances spent periods in Mantua, Florence, and North Africa, serving as rabbi, while authoring a sizeable and varied number of poetic compositions in Hebrew and the tractate of Hebrew poetics and rhetoric *Metek sefatayim* (Sweet Talk) (Rathaus 1995). He and his brother Jacob – himself an extraordinarily talented poet and one of the greatest representatives of Baroque poetry in Hebrew – were both vocal opponents of the growing influence of Kabbalah among Italian Jews and on these grounds suffered the ostracism of rabbis in Mantua and other Italian communities (Simonsohn 1977, 632-3).

<sup>7</sup> Frances 1932: no. 146 (*Hallel 'im kol shirim*).

<sup>8</sup> Among Frances' compositions are three more poems for music that he wrote for the Jewish holidays of *Shemini 'Azeret*, the seventh day of Passover, and *Shavu'ot*. All

As we have seen, in this period, it was not unusual for Hebrew authors to write short-to-medium-length narrative pieces for music as a result of a specific commission, nor was it uncommon for them to collaborate with composers in the creation of musical works that included sung parts, or to write verse having in mind pre-existent melodies (Golden 2018). Among his fellow Hebrew poets, though, Frances was the one who most often wrote music poetry, a circumstance evidencing not just a high level of exposure to and familiarity with contemporary music, particularly sacred one, but also an unprecedented understanding of the inner adaptability of Christian poetical and musical genres to Hebrew paraliturgical verse and of the ensuing potentialities.<sup>9</sup> The significance of his production also lies in the remarkable number of such pieces he penned at the request of confraternities, since, being they the outcome of specific commissions, these compositions provide precious information on the nature, range of activities, and aesthetic expectations of the sponsoring groups. Thus, in 1670, Frances composed a dramatic poem at the request of a Florentine confraternity called *Anelanti* (in Hebrew, *Sho'afim*, 'those who yearn'),<sup>10</sup> for them to "perform with the cittern and the lute according to the art of music"<sup>11</sup> (Adler 1966, 83-5). Except for the sparse information we can glean from Frances' own introductory notes to the composition,<sup>12</sup> purpose and nature of the

three built according to the same structure (two strophes of eight lines each alternating *settenari* and hendecasyllables according to the rhyme pattern ABBACCDD), they were all meant to be sung based on the melody of the Italian aria "Tra ferri chiusa e cinta [veggio]" (Frances 1932, nos. 140 [*Shurah kehillatekha*], 141 [*Eli ha-lo vakata*] and 142 [*Zuri terem hishma 'ta*]; Schirmann 1979, 2.66-7).

<sup>9</sup> Preserved in Frances' autograph collection of poems is another remarkable Hebrew composition for music, in this case inspired by the biblical episode of the slaughter of the first borne, a hugely popular theme in contemporary Christian musical drama and the figurative arts (Frances 1932, no. 143 [*'Uri na Mizrayim*]). As Frances' introductory note states, the text was composed "at the request of a synagogue cantor to be sung according to the melody of an utterly moving Italian lament" (Frances 1932, 158), whose title is unfortunately not mentioned. Frances' poem features a lamentation in which Pharaoh mourns the death of his own son, alongside all firstborn of Egypt. The piece was possibly meant to be performed during Passover communal celebrations.

<sup>10</sup> Frances 1932, no. 160 (*Wikkuah shirah*).

<sup>11</sup> "*Mashmi'im kol 'ale 'ugav we-kinnor 'al pi hokhmat ha-muzikah*". Frances' remarks about the circumstance of the commission are included in the author's introductory note to the composition (Frances 1932, 195).

<sup>12</sup> According to Frances, the confraternity had its own seat, a house in which was hanging a shield with the group's motto and emblem, this last portraying the image of a tortoise intent to climb a mountain (Frances 1932, 203). It is worth mentioning that the iconography of a tortoise, in this case bearing on his shell a wind-filled sail, had been chosen to give visual expression to Cosimo de Medici's favorite maxim *festina lente* and could be seen in Palazzo Vecchio, as elsewhere in Florence.

commissioning group are not known. Nevertheless, based on the name of the sodality, apparently alluding to messianic longing, and judging from the character of some of the works they commissioned, it seems they functioned as a sort of learned academy while also promoting some form of devotion of penitential nature. It is also clear that music and singing played a prominent role in the life of the group and, as a consequence, also in the communal events they hosted. The subject of Frances' dramatic poem, in Hebrew titled 'Dispute in Verse' (*Wikkuah shirah*), is the perennial battle between good and evil inclination for establishing dominion over mankind. In this case, the specific object of contention is the soul of a little child, who is asked to contemplate, with the help of "the tube of observers, which in Italian is called *canocchiale*"<sup>13</sup> the tortures inflicted to the damned in hell and the beatitude of the just in paradise. Eventually, he will become persuaded of the necessity to follow the good inclination and reject the evil one. Like in the case of Frances' *Song for Purim*, while the music scores have not been preserved, we can nevertheless reconstruct the work's structure and the function of each of its sections thanks to Frances' introductory notes as extant in his autograph collection of poems. We thus infer that the composition included arias, recitatives, and several duets. It also featured parts for three choruses: the first one, whose parts open and close the piece, showcased the 'company of singers' (*kat ha-meshorerim*),<sup>14</sup> possibly an allusion to the members of the confraternity, while the second and the third represented, respectively, the wicked condemned to hell (*kat nedunim ba-gehinnom*), and the just dwelling in paradise (*kat nohe eden*). In their part, the latter quote the confraternity's motto, *Ki im iga' agia* (No Reward Without Labor), thus creating a cleverly constructed and at the same time wishful allusion to the group's members and their acquired merits.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Shefoferet shel ha-zofim (ka'nokya'lo be-la'az)*. Notably, one of the first mentions of Galileo's telescope in Hebrew literature.

<sup>14</sup> Frances' terminology seems to allude to the meaning of the term *meshorerim* in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century synagogue practice, where it was used to indicate an ensemble of two or three singers whose task was to support the performance of the cantor, by chanting in unison or in parts, often according to improvisational singing techniques. Quite common in Ashkenazic synagogue services, the presence of *meshorerim* is attested in Amsterdam in the first half of the seventeenth century and mentioned, although with the alternate name of *mesayye'im* (backing [singers]), also by the Venetian rabbi Leon Modena in his response on art music for the synagogue (1605) (Adler 1966, 22-6).

<sup>15</sup> At the request of the same confraternity of *Anelanti*, Frances also composed a poem on the theme of Jewish exile, which, according to the author's introductory note, the group performed twice, in two different local synagogues, possibly on the occasion of one of the Jewish penitential holidays (Frances 1932, no. 147 [*Ana halakh dodi*]; Schirman 1979, 2.69; Adler 1966, 85). In terms of structure and metrical solutions, the com-

### 3. From Paper Stage to Collective Ritual

The poetic structure staging a dialogue between two contenders, which, as we have seen, was a favorite form in music poetry commissioned by confraternities, was in itself not new to Hebrew literature (Yahalom 2008), nor to Hebrew poetry written in Italy;<sup>16</sup> neither was unattempted the poetic representation of the torments inflicted to the damned in hell and, contrasted to those, of the delights awaiting the just in paradise, a recurring theme in Hebrew literature written in Italy, grounded in the centuries-long familiarity of Italian Jews with Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Zacuto 2016, 35-42). Contemporary Counter Reformation culture, from homiletics to sacred poetry to the visual arts, was replete of depictions of the afterlife punishments, hell, and the day of judgment. In the affective religiosity of the time, where believers were encouraged to seek an emotional and sensorial connection to the contents of their faith, religious leaders and educators firmly believed in the formative task of evoking terrifying visions of the afterworld, whose mental visualization by the devotee was deemed at a time edifying and morbidly alluring.<sup>17</sup> Contemporary Jewish moralistic literature con-

position, whose scores are not extant, conforms to the genre of the cantata. It stages an allegorical representation in which the main character, called *Bat Ziyon* (Daughter of Sion), gives vent to her despair after her beloved (an allegory for God) abandoned her and deserted her home, this being the Jerusalem Temple. Her lament is answered by a chorus of prophets (*kat nevi'im*), whose parts were likely performed by the confraternity members themselves. For the same group Frances probably composed also two other Hebrew poems falling into the genre of the cantata, both devoted to the theme of the redemption of the People of Israel. Although Frances did not leave any note explicitly linking these two compositions to the *Anelanti*, the topic treated and the fact that in both pieces one of the two extant parts was meant to be sung, again, by a choir referred to as the 'company of singers' (*kat meshorerim*), seem to indicate that also these two pieces were the result of specific commissions coming from the Florentine group (Frances 1932, nos. 144 [*Kawweh libbi qawweh*] and 139 [*Names tokh me'i*]).

<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that in his *Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche*, the Jewish playwright Leone de' Sommi mentioned the discovery and translation from Chaldean of a very ancient, unfortunately unidentified work titled *The Course of Life*, centered around the competition between the guardian angel and the tempter demon for gaining control over the soul of a young man. According to De' Sommi, the work was written in such excellent style and was so well devised "that one ought to think it was composed for representation, and even that it was, in fact, performed in public" [. . . Che non si può creder altro, se non che fosse composta per rappresentarsi, et rappresentata forse anco in loco publico] (De' Sommi 1968, 14-5).

<sup>17</sup> See for example the fortunate compilation *L'uomo al punto* (*The Man on the Brink [of Death]*), by the Jesuit Daniello Bartoli (1608-1685). First printed in Rome in 1667, and then reprinted in Venice in the following year, the work is organized in twenty chapters, each of them devoted to a different meditation revolving around the concept of

formed to the trend amidst a deep concern for illness and the momentous time of the passing, for the dying individual, and for the rituals ensuring a ‘good death’.<sup>18</sup> It is this peculiar cultural atmosphere that explains why, after Zacuto’s death in 1697, the fortuitous discovery of his dramatic poem *Tofteh ‘arukh* among his unpublished writings did not remain a marginal episode in the author’s posthumous fame, but triggered a chain of events, all linked to confraternal initiatives, that helped transforming a manuscript left in the drawer into a cultural sensation, thus paving the way for the Ferrara productions.

Mantua held an unmatched place in the history of Jewish theatrical practice as home to the extraordinary career of Leone de’ Sommi (Jehudah Sommo, 1527-1592), one of the greatest playwrights, producers, and theatre theoreticians of the sixteenth century (Beecher 1993; Belkin 1997; Scola 2008). During Zacuto’s lifetime, the town was still under the rule of the Gonzagas, but the court was no longer the designated arena for Jewish theatrical entertainments, while dramatic literature was yet to be confined to performance in public theatres. Although scant, there is evidence that Mantuan Jews were still engaging in theatrical activities, but much had changed in terms of nature of such productions, as, more in general, in the cultural and intellectual atmosphere permeating the Jewish quarter (Simonsohn 1977, 667-9). On the one hand, growing restrictions imposed on the Jewish community had curbed opportunities for Jewish theatre professionals to engage the Christian audience (Jaffe-Berg 2015, 121-44 and 2018, 677-9). On the other hand, a more religiously inclined climate within the Jewish quarter, partly fostered by the diffusion of Kabbalah and its customs, was

death. In his preface, before illustrating scope and aims of the compilation, the author remarks how “la morte anti-pensata [riesca] dispiacevole al gusto, ma salutarifera al cuore” (“thinking about death ahead of time, although unpalatable, is salutiferous for the heart” [translation mine], Bartoli 1930, 1.3). On Counter Reformation imaginary concerning hell, see Camporesi 1990, 3-122.

<sup>18</sup> Several mystical beliefs and customs pertaining to death and the afterlife fate of the soul are included in *Ma‘avar Yabbok* (The Crossing of the Jabbok) by the Modenese rabbi Aaron Berechiah Modena (d. 1639). First printed in 1626 in Mantua, and then reprinted several times in abridged versions, the book was a compilation of readings and prayers meant to assist and guide the believer during sickness, at deathbed, and through burial and mourning rites. For a description and contextualization of Modena’s compilation, see Bar-Levav 1995. Lengthy descriptions of the punishments inflicted on the wicked in hell and of the blessings bestowed on the just in paradise were included in the fortunate manual on morals and religious conduct *Reshit Hokhmah* (*Beginning of Wisdom*) by the sixteenth-century kabbalist Elijah Vidas (also De Vidas). First printed in Venice in 1579, Vidas compilation became an instant bestseller and was demonstrably used by Zacuto as a sourcebook during the composition of *Tofteh ‘arukh* (Zacuto 2016, 45-8).

giving rise to forms of intra-Jewish entertainments and spectacles, mostly of religious nature, whose natural frames, besides communal settings, were scholarly and confraternal circles (Schirmann 1979, 2.63-80; Bregman 2003b). This rechannelling of creative impulses into religiosity and devotion compelled the community to carve new opportunities out of the Jewish liturgical calendar for theatre or music making, or for performances combining both practices, while Jewish *literati*, following the example of what was happening outside of the ghetto walls, turned to religious and biblical topics searching for inspiration.

In spite of a cultural atmosphere intensely preoccupied with devotion and religiosity, and notwithstanding the popularity of sacred drama in the surrounding Christian culture and among fellow writers, Zacuto's dramatic works had never left the author's drawer, a remarkable circumstance if we take into consideration that most of his occasional poems had been circulated as *fogli volanti* and a sizeable number of his religious hymns had appeared in print inserted in prayer books for special liturgical occasions – most of them compiled by Zacuto himself (Lattes 2003). The descendant of former Iberian *conversos*, Zacuto was endowed with a personality marked by austere religiosity. As a rabbi and a legal scholar, he was certainly aware of the negative reputation attached to theatre in Jewish tradition since Talmudic times,<sup>19</sup> as well as of the harsh opinions expressed by some of his fellow rabbis concerning the moral appropriateness for Jews to attend theatrical spectacles – let alone engage in theatre making – outside of the few occasions in which such diversions were allowed, such as during Purim.<sup>20</sup> Besides, Zacuto's two dramatic poems were not, strictly speaking, meant for the stage. The first, *Yesod 'olam (The World's Foundation)* cel-

<sup>19</sup> Rabbinical opposition to spectacles originally included also the circus which, together with theatre, was perceived as epitomizing the pernicious effects of Hellenization. Eventually, the Talmudic expression *bate tarteya'ot u-vate kirkesayot* ('theatres and circuses') became a technical term indicating all kind of unsuitable entertainments. Rabbinical hostility towards all Roman and Greek public spectacles had a counterpart in Patristic tradition, as best exemplified by Isidore of Seville's influential *Ethymologiae*, in which theatre was similarly grouped with circus and other entertainments of the same sort (Jones 1982).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the *responsum* by one of Zacuto's contemporaries, Rabbi Samuel Aboab (d. 1694), himself of *converso* descent, vehemently opposing the presence in the Venetian ghetto of places designated and used for theatrical representations in which, in his words, "men, women, children, modest daughters of Israel and trollops as well, all gather" (*we-ne'esfu shammah anashim nashim we-taf benot Yisra'el ha-zenu'ot'im ha-peruzot*) (Aboab 1702, no. 4; Schirmann 1979, 2.56). It is worth noting that, while theatres kept on being condemned by rabbis as promiscuous and morally corrupting, the writing of dramatic literature was never under attack and, in fact, this period saw the highest number of rabbis and Jewish scholars engaging in it.



ebredated the biblical patriarch Abraham as the founder of the true monotheistic religion by sketching his life according to rabbinical sources (Melkman 1967; Rathaus 2011); the second, *Tofteh 'arukh (Hell Arrayed)*, as mentioned, was a graphic, dark representation of the punishments inflicted to sinners in the afterlife according to Kabbalah (Hamiel 1949-50; Bregman 2003a; Andreatta 2019). While both incorporated typical theatrical elements, such as dialogues and stage directions, albeit minimal, they rather belonged to the genre of closet drama, a variety of dramatic compositions meant for silent reading or to be read aloud by one or several readers in front of a selected audience, instead of being performed on stage by professional actors (Straznický 2002). In Italy, this literary genre had its roots in the humanistic tragedy inspired to Roman history produced within university and erudite circles, a phenomenon that is generally associated with the revival of classical Latin tradition. During the Counter Reformation period, closet drama morphed into the subgenre of the edifying tragedy and found one of its foremost Italian representatives in Benedetto Cinquanta (d. after 1635), a preacher affiliated with the Order of Friars Minor. His plays, inspired by parables from the Gospel, the life of saints, but also historical events, presented typical features, such as a scanty and linear plot, a preference for long monologues, no classical division of action, and frequent departures from the Aristotelian unities of place and time. Cinquanta's tragedies are in fact reminiscent of sermons: they display a similar meandering structure, built through addition and conceptual repetitiveness, and an analogous preference for lashing tones and terrifying images that balance for the limited dramatic action (Angelini, Asor Rosa and Nigro 1974, 203-11). Like Zacuto's dramatic poems, also Cinquanta's tragedies were not meant to be performed by actors during spectacles open to a general public, but rather to be read aloud in restricted gatherings, or simply for individual consumption. The incorporation of basic stage directions was aimed to dramatize the text, thus facilitating the reader (or listener) in his task of recreating a vivid mental representation of the situation portrayed. More than a theatre of action, this was a theatre of the mind, whose purpose was to conjure up an inward experience that, nevertheless, was expected to be by no means less gripping and emotionally impacting than the actual watching of a live performance on stage.

As a matter of fact, Zacuto himself took precautions in order to avoid the circulation or future publication of his two dramatic poems: in his will, he bequeathed all his unpublished writings to his wife Rachel, a bundle of works which included, besides *Tofteh 'arukh* and *Yesod 'olam*, also Zacuto's personal copies of two fundamental works of, respectively, Jewish legal and mystical tradition, the *Mishnah* and the *Zohar*, both inscribed with his own

marginal annotations.<sup>21</sup> Zacuto's widow, though, apparently allowed members of the *Ḥadashim la-bekarim*, the devotional confraternity that Zacuto himself had established in the Mantuan ghetto and that for years used to convene in the private study house (*bet midrash*) of its founder, access to the late rabbi's papers. A vivid account of the thrilling moment in which *Tofteh 'arukh* was first located among Zacuto's unpublished papers and of the strong impression the work made on the members of the *Ḥadashim la-bekarim*, thus prompting the group's subsequent decision to bring it to Venice and have it printed as a book is included in the prefatory materials inserted in the first edition of *Tofteh 'arukh*, printed in Venice in 1715:

ובהיותם מבקשים וחוקרים לזכות הרבים מצאו ספר אחד בכתבי הקדש של הרב זלה"ה אשר אין לא מחירים על עונש הרשעים אשר במאזה נאדים והוחזקו מסותרי הרבים וסרוחי טבולים בראשיהם ותולדותיהם כיוצא גיהם בנים משחיתים סוררים ומורים ולכן גמרו אומר להדפיסו בבאור כל מלה קשה למען ירוץ הקורא בו אף מן הקטנים והצעירים.

[Always zealous in their studies for the benefit of the many, [the members of the confraternity] found a work among the teacher's writings that had no equal. It was devoted to the punishments inflicted upon the wicked (who [in hell] are being stewed like in a pot or snatched by a horde of demons and immersed by their head into filthy liquids!), whose vicissitudes could arouse regret into sinners, miscreants, and rebels. Therefore, they gave instructions that it be printed along with the explanation of all its difficult words, so that also the less educated and the young could easily read it.]

(Zacuto 1715, f. 2r [translation mine])

The strophe-by-strophe explication of the poem and elucidation of all its most difficult words were the work of the Mantuan scholar Aviad Sar-Shalom Basilea (c. 1680-1743). A former disciple of Zacuto, Basilea was a follower of Kabbalah but also well versed in the sciences (Simonsohn 1977, 696-7; Ruderman 1995, 213-28). As Basilea himself recounts in the introductory note included in the first reprint of *Tofte 'arukh* in 1744, he had resolved to compile the explicatory apparatus once he had realized that "the words of this work and its discourse had become impenetrable and that what was once transparent had turned obscure, so much so that the members [of the confraternity] had stopped reading it".<sup>22</sup> Thus, it seems that *Tofteh 'arukh* had been circulated among the confraternity members well

<sup>21</sup> The copy of the will was first located in the State Archives of Mantua by Shlomo Simonsohn (Simonshon 1977, 738n296). Its publication by Pier Cesare Ioly Zorattini is forthcoming. I thank Prof. Ioly Zorattini for kindly allowing me to have access to it.

<sup>22</sup> "Et divre ha-sefer we-et siḥo u-setumim we-ḥatumim ha-devarim we-ḥalone yedi'ato atumim u-shekufim u-segurim 'ad ki ḥadlu ha-haverim likrot bo" (Zacuto 1744, f. [2v] [translation mine]).



before it was printed, possibly adopted as one of the readings used during the group's gatherings. Although, as already remarked, Zacuto probably had never intended his poem to be circulated, the confraternity's initiative was not, in the end, a complete betrayal of their teacher's expectations: this type of consumption, within a small, intimate group of people in the frame of religious study and devotional rituals of penitential nature, was in line with the mode of reading Zacuto probably had in mind when he wrote his poem. Besides, we may suppose that in the context of the confraternity gatherings, where the reading of texts as well as the recitation of prayers were customarily marked by a state of mental and emotional absorption known as *kawwanah* (intention), readers were expected to be concentrated on their assignment of extracting from the poem a moral teaching, rather than pursuing pure esthetical enjoyment. And for the reading to have its ritual effect comprehension of the text was crucial. With its intricate language and cryptic imaginary, *Tofteh 'arukh* apparently posed insurmountable challenges to the members of the confraternity, who probably possessed varying levels of familiarity with Kabbalistic literature. The elucidation of the poem's most difficult words was an indispensable tool, given Zacuto's frequent resort to rare words, his recurrent use of homophones and homographs and even, in a few cases, of purportedly coined neologisms. The printing of *Tofteh 'arukh* was a step towards the metamorphosis of the poem into a ready-made tool for both confraternal study and self-edification. Besides furnishing the poem with a material support and expanding it with the insertion of Basilea's apparatus (in itself a meta-text) the printing was also a move towards the circulation of *Tofteh 'arukh* out of the narrow circle of initiated readers, something consciously pursued by the confraternity, as Basilea's reference to "the less educated and the young" unambiguously reveals.

Indeed, transformed into a portable book, *Tofteh 'arukh* left the narrow premises of Zacuto's former study house, crossed the border of Mantua's ghetto walls and reached the city of Ferrara, then part of the Papal Territories, there to become the object of avid and passionate reception. Members of the local *Ḥadashim la-bekarim* confraternity started to use it during their gatherings following the practice of their Mantuan counterparts, until when, in the summer of 1720, they staged a series of dramatized readings of the text open to the entire community, thus shifting Zacuto's work from performance on the "paper stage" (Mullaney 2013; Willie 2013) to presentation in a public space. A vivid account of the Ferrara public readings and of the impact they had on the public in attendance is provided, in the flowery and allusive style then cultivated by Italian Hebrew writers, by Jacob Dan-

iel Olmo (c. 1690-1757),<sup>23</sup> the *massaro* of the Ferrara *Hadashim la-bekarim* group and the initiator of the performances:

אשר בשנת הת"ף בהתאסף ראשי עם קדוש עדה קדושה מהדרין מן המידרין בק"ק פירארה בחברת חדשים לבקרים לתקן ולסדר לומר ברבים אחר חצות יום תיקון חצות בין המצרים ביני וביני עדי בוא הקהל ואוספו אספה והנם תדיר מחורין לקונן על חרבן ציון אנוכי הקורא בו ומבאר עונשי גהינם קלין וחמורין כל קבל דנא די תיכול פטרין לעורר ולהזקק הלבבות גולירין מיניה וביה כל פיות בקל קנא משרוקיתא קתרוס שבכא פסנתרין יפטירו בספר הלז ושרו בשירין.

[In the year 5480 [1720], the leaders of the confraternity *Hadashim la-bekarim*, a saintly congregation of most pious men in the holy city of Ferrara gathered to publicly hold the Midnight Vigil 'within the straits'<sup>24</sup> every day, after midnight. People from the community came, gathering in large numbers and attending with regularity. And in order to mourn over the destruction of Zion, I was reading from the poem, illustrating the punishments inflicted in the Gehenna, from the mildest ones to the harshest, and how each [sin] is subject to a specific retribution; this with the purpose of moving and fortifying the hearts of the people in attendance. The music of a consorts of instruments (cf. Daniel 3:5) and the singing of chants concluded the reading.]

(Zacuto 1744, f. 3r [translation mine])

Olmo's account provides a rather accurate idea of how the performances were conducted: a single reader, Olmo himself, played the different roles in the poem (the dead protagonist and his antagonist, the demon), lending his voice to both characters. He also interspersed the recitation with explanations – likely delivered in Italian – of the meaning of the poem. The monophonic reading was interspersed with the singing of religious hymns by the choir of the spectators, while the musical accompaniment was possibly extended also to the recited parts. The approximate outcome, in terms of sound experience, must have resembled that afforded by a cantata, with its alternation of solo recitatives and arias sung by a choir.

By shifting confraternal devotions from the private space of the group's rituals to the public sphere of a communal ceremony, the Ferrara productions of *Tofteh 'arukh* mark a new level in confraternal outreach. They also evidence a novel understanding of the poem's nature and its inherent potentialities. An hybrid between moralistic and dramatic literature,

<sup>23</sup> Olmo was the author of a 'sequel' to Zacuto's *Tofteh 'arukh*, a poem titled *Eden 'arukh* (*Paradise Arrayed*), consisting of a description of the delights awaiting the just in heaven. It had a similar structure to Zacuto's poem, only reversed. Olmo's composition was inserted alongside *Tofteh 'arukh* in some of its later reprints, starting with the 1744 printing.

<sup>24</sup> The expression traditionally indicates the three weeks between the 17th of *Tammuz* and the 9th of *Av*.

Zacuto's poem was designed to provide the reader an inward experience in the form of a penitential journey, whose occasion was not the quest for spiritual transcendence, like in a sizeable portion of Spanish theatre of the seventeenth century (Delgado Morales 2014), but rather a deep preoccupation with the pervasiveness of sin and transgression in human life, and the consequent yearn for conversion and reparation. The members of the confraternity must have sensed that the dramatization of extreme feelings enacted in the poem, on the one hand, and Zacuto's mastery at wrapping a religious and moralizing topic in the cloak of secular poetic forms, on the other, could well serve the group in their attempt to reach wider and more variegated audiences – both among the erudite and the uncultivated – outside the confraternal circle. At one time, they seem to have been aware of the poem's unsuitability for a conventional representation on stage: indeed, how to overcome the challenges posed by a theatrical representation of afterlife and hell? How to reproduce on the stage the decaying body of the protagonist, or the horrific torments inflicted on the crowd of the dead, or the frightful appearance of the demons? A dramatized reading could obviate the difficulties embedded into reenacting on stage the most graphic parts of the poem, while at the same time prompting the listeners to conjure up a vivid representation in their own mind by using the spoken word to guide their affects and imagination. In this respect, Olmo and his companions understood that the involution, obscurity, and linguistic complexity characterizing the poem were not just an exercise in Hebrew rhetoric, but were meant, rather, to enact the incantation of the word in the audience's minds. As such, they could also be used to unleash their fears and fantasies.

In fact, the members of the Mantuan *Ḥadashim la-bekarim* had already perceived the intrinsic affinity between *Tofteh 'arukh*, with its underlying penitential ideology, and the rituals they were performing daily. In the end, the watchers' devotions channelled much more than messianic expectations, providing a frame for the expression of the devotees' sentiment of culpability for sins committed, their feeling of physical and spiritual impurity, and the consequent urge to expiate. The members of the Ferrara confraternity took this process a step further. By leveraging on the collective sense of guilt and fears, the public readings were extending the confraternity agenda to include the entire community by staging what was *de facto* a collective rite of atonement. Certainly, the cognitive and intellectual response of the audience must have varied according to differing levels of knowledge of Hebrew literature and exposure to Kabbalah and related texts; but in any event, the agency displayed by the confraternity in ritualizing a dramatized reading relied on the emotional receptiveness of the public in attendance or, in other words, on the fact that even those who had

only a flimsy grasp of the theological implications of denying the existence of hell, could nevertheless relate to the universal idea of death in its more lugubrious and morbid aspects. While Olmo's account mentions only the external elements of spectatorship, namely attendance and active participation in the event, it nevertheless contains hints that allow us to reconstruct, at least approximately, the audience's actual experience. The reference to some of the material and sensorial aspects marking the performance of Zacuto's poem, such as the use of music and choral chanting, combined with the nocturnal setting and the sombre overtones pervading the penitential celebration, enables us to recover the atmosphere of religious solemnity and dramatic tension permeating the event, and to gain some insight into the perceptual and interpretative response they elicited in the audience. An example of religious ritual combined with carefully orchestrated entertainment, the dramatized readings hosted by the Ferrara *Hadashim la-bekarim* were a form of social production that had larger implications than solely promoting the confraternal rites and gaining the group public visibility. Against the backdrop of the only public space allocated to Jews in the early modern Christian city, the meta-textual qualities of *Tofteh 'arukh* and the meta-dramatic implications of the staged event in fact enabled both the audience and the confraternity of watchers to reaffirm and reinforce limits and domain of their own identity and precarious micro-society.

## Works Cited

- Aboab, Samuel. 1702. *Devar Shemu'el*. Venice: Stamperia Vendramina.
- Adler, Israel, ed. 1992. *Hosha'nah Rabbah in Casale Monferrato, 1733: Musical ceremony for three voices, strings, oboes, trumpets and basso continuo by anonymous composers. Liturgical text and cantata "Dio, Clemenza e Rigore" (God, Defender and Accuser), libretto by S.H. Jarach*. Jerusalem: Jewish Music Research Centre and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
- 1966. *La pratique musicale savante dans quelques communautés juives en Europe aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, 2 vols. Paris La Haye: Mouton & Co.
- Andreatta, Michela. 2019. "The Baroque World of Moses Zacuto's *Tofte Aruk*h". In *The Poet and the World: Studies in Honor of Wout van Bekkum*, ed. by Elisabeth Hollender, Naoya Katsumata and Joachim Yeshaya, 275-97. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter Publishers.
- 2011. "The Printing of Devotion in 17th-Century Italy: Prayer Books Printed for the *Shomrim la-Boker* Confraternities". In *The Hebrew Book in Early Modern Italy*, ed. by Joseph Hacker and Adam Shear, 156-70. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Angelini, Franca, Alberto Asor Rosa, and Salvatore S. Nigro, eds. 1974. *La letteratura italiana storia e testi, vol. 5(2): Il Seicento. La nuova scienza e la crisi del barocco*. Roma and Bari: Editori Laterza.

- Bar-Levav, Avriel. 1995. "Rabbi Aaron Berakhiah of Modena and Rabbi Naftali Hakohen Katz: Founding Fathers of the Books for the Sick and the Dying" [Hebrew]. *Asufot* 9: 189-234.
- Bartoli, Daniello. 1930. *L'uomo al punto, cioè l'uomo in punto di morte*, ed. by Adolfo Faggi, 2 vols. Turin: UTET.
- Beecher, Donald. 1993. "Leone de' Sommi and Jewish Theatre in Renaissance Mantua". *Renaissance and Reformation* 17 (2): 5-19.
- Belkin, Ahuvah, ed. 1997. *Leone de' Sommi and the Performing Arts*. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University.
- Benayahu, Meir. 1998. "The Shomerim la-boker Confraternity" [Hebrew]. *Asufot* 11: 101-26.
- ed. 1988. *A Single Generation in the Land: Letters of R. Samuel Aboab and R. Moses Zacuto Concerning the Affairs of the Land of Israel (1639-1666)* [Hebrew]. Jerusalem: Yad Harav Nissim Press.
- Bonfil, Reuven. 2001. "Rabbis, Jesuits and Enigmas: Some Remarks on the Cultural Universe of Moses Zacuto". *Italia* 13-15: 169-89.
- Bregman, Dvora. 2017. "On the Mystery of the Echo" [Hebrew]. *Kabbalah* 36: 79-97.
- ed. 2009. "I Raise My Heart": *Poems by Moses Zacuto* [Hebrew]. Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute.
- 2006. *The Golden Way: The Hebrew Sonnet during the Renaissance and the Baroque*, transl. by Ann Brener. Tempe, Arizona: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.
- 2003a. "Dimness and Clarity in *Tofteh Aruch* by Rabbi Moses Zacuto" [Hebrew]. *Pe'amim* 96: 35-52.
- ed. 2003b. *The Glory of Sinai: The Dramatic Works of Matityahu (Donato) Nissim Terni* [Hebrew]. Jerusalem: The Ben Zvi Institute and The Hebrew University.
- Burgard, Peter J. 2019. *Baroque: Figures of Excess in 17th-Century European Art and German Literature*. Leiden and Boston: Wilhelm Fink.
- Camporesi, Piero. 1990. *The Fear of Hell: Images of Damnation and Salvation in Early Modern Europe*, transl. by Lucinda Byatt. University Park, Penn: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Delgado Morales, Manuel. 2014. "The Quest for Spiritual Transcendence in the Theater of Gil Vicente". In *A Companion to Early Modern Hispanic Theater*, ed. by Hilaire Kallendorf, 217-27. Leiden and New York: Brill.
- De' Sommi, Leone. 1968. *Quattro dialoghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche*, ed. by Ferruccio Marotti. Milan: Il Polifilo.
- Fine, Lawrence. 2003. *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Frances, Immanuel. 1932. *Diwan*, ed. by Shimon Bernstein. Tel Aviv: Dvir.
- Golden, Kedem. 2018. "An Italian Tune in the Synagogue: An Unexplored Contractum by Leon Modena". *Revue des études juives* 177 (3-4): 391-420.
- Grossi, Carlo. 1965. *Cantata Ebraica in dialogo, voce sola e choro*, ed. by Israel Adler. Tel Aviv: Israeli Music Publications.
- Hallamish, Moshe. 2000. *Kabbalah: In Liturgy, Halakah and Customs* [Hebrew]. Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University.
- Hamiel, Ch. 1949-50. "Moses Zacuto's *Tofteh 'Arukh*" [Hebrew]. *Sinai* 25: 304-19; 26: 101-12.

- Harrán, Don. 1999. *Salamone Rossi: Jewish Musician in Late Renaissance Mantua*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 1998. “‘Dum Recordaremur Sion’: Music in the Life and Thought of the Venetian Rabbi Leon Modena (1571-1648)”. *AJS Review* 23 (1): 17-61.
- Horowitz, Elliot S. 2001. “Processions, Piety, and Jewish Confraternities.” In *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*, ed. by Robert C. Davis and Benjamin Ravid, 231-48. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- 1989. “Coffee, Coffee Houses, and the Nocturnal Rituals of Early Modern Jewry”. *AJS Review* 14: 17-46.
- 1987. “Jewish Confraternal Piety in the Veneto in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries”. In *Gli Ebrei e Venezia. Secoli XIV-XVIII. Atti del Convegno internazionale organizzato dall’Istituto di storia della società e dello Stato veneziano della Fondazione Giorgio Cini (Venezia, Isola di San Giorgio Maggiore, 5-10 giugno 1983)*, ed. by Gaetano Cozzi, 301-13. Milan: Edizioni Comunità.
- Jaffe-Berg, Erith. 2018. “Drama as Disputation in Mantua”. *Medieval Encounters* 24: 666-79.
- 2015. *Commedia dell’Arte and the Mediterranean: Charting Journeys and Mapping ‘Others’*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Jones, Joseph R. 1982. “Isidore and the Theater”. *Comparative Drama* 16 (1): 26-48.
- Lattes, Andrea Yaakov. 2003. “Rabbi Moses Zacuto’s Printed Works” [Hebrew]. *Pe’amim* 96: 21-33.
- Melkman, Joseph. 1967. “Moses Zacuto’s Play Yesod Olam”. *Studia Rosenthaliana* 1: 1-26.
- Morosini, Giulio. 1683. *Via della fede mostrata agli Ebrei*. Rome: Sacra Congregazione per la Propaganda della Fede.
- Mullaney, Steven. 2013. “What’s Hamlet to Habermas? Spatial Literacy, Theatrical Publication, and the Publics of Early Modern Public Stage”. In *Making Space Public in Early Modern Europe: Performance, Geography, Privacy*, ed. by Angela Vanhaelen and Joseph P. Ward, 17-40. London: Routledge.
- Pagis, Dan. 1986. *A Secret Sealed: Hebrew Baroque Emblem Riddles from Italy and Holland* [Hebrew]. Jerusalem: The Magnes Press and The Hebrew University.
- 1973. “The Invention of the Hebrew Iambus and Changes in the Meter of Hebrew Poetry in Italy” [Hebrew], *Ha-sifrut* 4 (4): 651-712.
- Rathaus, Ariel. 2011. “Disputa teologica in un mondo alla rovescia: il dramma su Abramo di Moshè Zacuto.” *Altre Modernità* June: 1-14.  
<https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/AMonline/article/view/1157> (Accessed 1 July 2020).
- 1995. “Poetiche della scuola ebraico-italiana”. *Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 61 (1-2): 189-226.
- Rau, Robert. 1999. *Music and Poetry in 17th Century Rome: Settings of the Canzonetta and Cantata Texts of Francesco Balducci, Domenico Benigni, Francesco Melosio, and Antonio Abati*. PhD Dissertation, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.
- Rivlin, Bracha. 1991. *Mutual Responsibility in the Italian Ghetto: Holy Societies 1516–1789* [Hebrew]. Jerusalem: Magnes Press and the Hebrew University.

- Rosand, Ellen. 1990. *Opera in 17th Century Venice: The Creation of a Genre*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press.
- Ruderman, David B. 1995. *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Schirmann, Ḥayyim. 1979. *Studies in the History of Hebrew Poetry and Drama* [Hebrew], 2 vols. Jerusalem: Bialik Institute.
- Scola, Ilaria. 2008. *Interdiscorsività nell'opera di Leone de' Sommi. Tra giudaismo, classicismo e umanesimo*. Ravenna: Longo Editore.
- Simonsohn, Shlomo. 1977. *History of the Jews in the Duchy of Mantua*. Jerusalem: Kiryath Sepher.
- Straznicky, Marta. 2002. "Closet Drama". In *A Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. by Arthur F. Kinney, 416-30. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Tishby, Yeshayahu. 1974. "The Confrontation between Lurianic Kabbalah and Cordoverian Kabbalah in the Writings and Life of Rabbi Aaron Berechiah of Modena" [Hebrew]. *Zion* 39 (1-2): 8-85.
- Yahalom, Joseph. 2008. "Clashing Circles: The Debate between Body and Soul in Sacred Poetry" [Hebrew]. *Mabbua* 32: 114-23.
- Willie, Rachel. 2013. "Viewing the Paper Stage: Civil War, Print, Theatre and the Public Sphere". In *Making Space Public in Early Modern Europe: Performance, Geography, Privacy*, ed. by Angela Vanhaelen and Joseph P. Ward, 54-75. London: Routledge.
- Zacuto, Moses. 2016. "L'inferno allestito" (Toftèh 'arukh). *Poema di un rabbino del Seicento sull'oltretomba dei malvagi*, ed. by Michela Andreatta. Milan: Bompiani.
- 1744. *Sefer tofteh 'arukh... we-Sefer 'eden 'arukh*. Venice: Stamperia Bragadina.
- 1715. *Tofteh 'arukh*. Venice: Stamperia Bragadina.



CHIARA CARMEN SCORDARI\*

## Behind Multiple Masks: Leon Modena's Diasporic Tragedy *L'Ester* in Seventeenth-Century Venice

Abstract

Particularly in times of crisis and historical challenges, the biblical figure of Esther has been variously interpreted as a paradigm of resistance and renewal of communitarian bonds. Esther is a creative mediator thanks to her always being the Other: the Other of man (Mordecai and Ahasuerus), of society (Persian court), and of Judaism. This paper focuses on Leon Modena's *L'Ester: Tragedia tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura* (1619). Particular attention is given to Modena's anthropological and political reading of *Ester's* characters, including the suicidal queen Vashti, whose impetuosity overshadows the taciturn Esther. The central figure is Mordecai: he typifies the 'wandering Jew' who lives a 'two-hats' existence and strives to find a balance between political realism and messianic expectations. Through its characters, Modena's Purim tragedy unveils paradoxical interlacings between despair and hope; cry of protest and prayer of prophecy; blinding passions and mediation strategies.

KEYWORDS: Leon Modena; Esther; diasporic tragedy

### 1. Leon Modena's *L'Ester*: A Story of Crisis and Resistance

Leon Modena's *L'Ester: Tragedia tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura* was published in Venice on Purim in 1619. The tragedy is a reworking of an earlier play written in 1558 by Modena's maternal uncle, Eleazar Levi (also known as Lazzaro Graziano) and Salomon Usque. Unfortunately, this former text is known today only thanks to Modena's mention in his foreword to the reader.<sup>1</sup>

From a cultural standpoint, Modena's *Ester* aims at conveying Judaism to the Christian world, merging Midrashic and Talmudic exegesis with *topoi* of Italian tragedy. Framed in the backdrop of the Persian court, Vashti

<sup>1</sup> "Sessant'anni in circa sono, che un Salomon Uschi, con luce, e aiuto di Lazaro di Gratian Levi mio materno zio, compose questa tragedia" (Modena 1619, *Letter to the readers*; "It was about sixty years ago that a certain Salomon Usque, enlightened and aided by Lazaro di Gratian Levi, my maternal uncle, wrote this tragedy", translation mine); cf. Roth 1943, 65-85, 77-8; Zavan 2004, 120-3.

\* University of Pisa – [chiaracarmenscordari@gmail.com](mailto:chiaracarmenscordari@gmail.com)



and Esther typify models of heroic behaviour equal to countering the social and cultural challenges Judaism had to face. While Esther is the silent and compliant instrument of divine action, thereby saving the covenantal community, Vashti personifies the exile's drama and the female loneliness, hovering between glorious past and present-day distress. From the political-religious standpoint, the play outlines a diasporic Judaism based on principles of tolerance and openness, and in dialogue with other cultures and traditions. Building on Esther's story, Modena sketches his own model for a clever Jewish mode of resistance when facing the religious and political challenges of early modern age.

However, behind Modena's *Ester* lies also a third and more personal reason. The tragedy is dedicated to the Venetian Jewish *salonnière* Sarra Sullam Copio (1592-1641). Modena had known Sarra for many years: he was related to the Copio family through his wife and knew her uncle, Moise Copio (a merchant, as his brother and Sarra's father Simon; Westwater 2020, 24; Modena 2000, 65). The dedication takes its cue from the correspondence between Sarra and the Genoese writer and monk Ansaldo Cebà (1567-1623), which began in 1618 – one year before the publication of Modena's *Ester*. Quite likely, Modena's purpose was to warn Sarra against the risks of her exchange with Cebà. Sarra began her correspondence with Cebà after reading his epic poem *La Reina Esther* (published in Genoa in 1615).<sup>2</sup> Cebà's portrayal of Esther as a courtly heroine and Vashti as a convert to Judaism seemed to Sarra both a celebration of Jewish national existence and an invitation to cross-faith dialogue (Westwater 2020, 24-30). Cebà's Vashti was a 'double' of Esther: the latter was an exceptional woman, imbued with moral virtues; by epitomizing a God-inspired reason, she foreshadowed true Christianity (Arbib 2003, 104). On the contrary, Vashti was a worldly woman, capable of murder because of her jealousy and vindictive nature. Only by facing up to Esther's moral virtues could she freely accept exile and convert to Judaism. Actually, the Platonic relationship between Sarra Copio Sullam and Ansaldo Cebà revolved around the question of conversion and religious identity: Cebà endeavored to convert Sarra to Christianity. To his eyes she appeared as a veiled matriarch, endowed with the charisma of Esther, whose historical mission was "to leave the Jewish ranks" ("lasciar l'Hebraica schiera", Cebà 1623, 24; translation mine) and become Catholic, accepting Christ's ethos, by turning into "the most just, the most innocent and the most blessed man" ("il più giusto, il più innocente, e il più sant'huomo", Cebà 1623, 7-8; translation mine):

<sup>2</sup> The exchange between the two began in spring 1618 and went on for four years. Ansaldo Cebà published his letters to Sarra Sullam Copio in 1623 (Cebà 1623). See Veltri 2009, 226-47: 229-33.

Mosse l'antica Esther le voci ardenti,  
 Ond'io ritrassi in carte i suoi splendori:  
 Movi tu, nova Sarra, i miei fervori  
 A farti luminosa in fra le genti.  
 Nobil, cred'io, sei tu, tu rappresenti  
 De la sposa d'Abramo gli antichi honori

...

Ma tu porti però su gli occhi un velo,  
 Che ravvisar ti toglie il gran Pianeta,  
 Onde di vero amor ferisce il telo.  
 Tu feconda di gratie hai l'alma e lieta;  
 Ma non t'avvedi, oime, ch'errante zelo  
 Miseramente il passo al Ciel ti vieta  
 (Cebà 1623, 3-4)

[Ancient Esther roused burning voices,  
 Whence I portrayed her splendor on paper;  
 May you, new Sarra, rouse my fervors  
 To make you gleam midst the nations.  
 Noble you are, I believe; you represent  
 The ancient honors of Abraham's wife

...

But over your eyes you carry a veil  
 Preventing you from seeing the Great Planet,  
 From which the lance of true love strikes.  
 You have a soul fruitful and fertile with graces,  
 But alas! You do not notice how an erroneous zeal  
 Meanly denies you the passage to heaven.  
 (translation in Harrán 2009, 120-1, with minor changes)]

Despite Cebà's numerous requests of conversion, Sarra stood firm in her Jewish faith. For Cebà, "Reina Esther" was, after all, "a Christian because she believed in Christ, who one day is going to come". Therefore, he wrote to Sarra: "You are, I don't mean Jewish, but pertinacious, because you don't believe in Christ who came" ("La Reina Esther, se nol sapete, fù Christiana, perche credette in Christo venturo; e voi siete, non voglio dir hebrea, ma pertinace, perche non credete in Cristo venuto", Cebà 1623, 90-1; translation mine). In other words, what in Cebà's poem appeared to be an endorsement of Judaism and of female heroism, eventually turns out to be a pattern of Christianity and a type of Christ's coming.

Against this backdrop of intellectual liaisons, Sarra Copio Sullam emerges as a "very peculiar woman", who felt more comfortable with the male models of virtues, such as the Abrahamitic one (Arbib 1999, 146). Further evidence comes from Sarra's *Manifesto* (1621), a letter in which she

confuted the indictment of the archdeacon of Treviso Baldassare Bonifacio who accused her of denying the immortality of the soul. She declared that she followed Abraham's example of behaviour, and challenged her accuser "without arms" using only her "firmness of mind" and the "religious feeling" (translation in Harrán 2009, 316): "the deed itself [i.e. the false accusations] did not require any other learning than the firmness of my mind and of that religious feeling that I owe to God and to the law that He gave me" (translation in Harrán 2009 312-13). It is not surprising that, in his *Ester*, Modena offers Sarra Copio Sullam a "deflationary" model of female heroism (Fortis 2003, 31-2). He emphasizes the dialectical relation between "our two ancient mothers, Sarah and Esther". While the matriarch Sarah, endowed with saint-like traits, generated Jewish lineage, the pious queen Esther regenerated it, saving it from death: Sarra Copio Sullam is urged to imitate the kindness, the virtue, and the greatness of the two biblical women.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Who Hides Behind Vashti?

Those who expect to find in Modena's play an exaltation of Esther's personality will be disappointed. In the *Megillah*, Esther stands at the centre of the story. Unlike Vashti, a static character, unwilling to accept a subordinate role within the courtly environment, Esther appears as a creative and dynamic person: she emerges from her initial concealment, characterized by submissiveness, and weakness, finally becoming the authoritative leader who saves her own community from annihilation. On the contrary, in Modena's play, Esther is almost overshadowed by Vashti. The latter enters in 1.4: the scene takes place in an atmosphere full of bad omens. In the prologue, the shadow of Amelek – probably an adaptation of Vashti's shadow in Vincenzo Gramigna's tragedy *Amano* (1614) – comes back from hell to mourn the loss of his beloved son Haman; and in 1.2, Mordecai charges Vashti to hinder Jewish redemption. Only the Eunuch Zethar shows a sympathetic concern for Vashti, who manifested a "virile" and "great spirit" ("con animo virile, animo grande", Modena 1619, 1.3; translation mine) by refusing to obey to Ahasuerus and display her beauty to Persian officials.

Modena's approach to Vashti is, therefore, ambiguous. In 1.2 Mordecai

<sup>3</sup> "E certo, che si come è corrispondenza tra queste nostre antiche madri Sarra, et Ester, che quella generò la stirpe nostra, e questa la regenerò, salvandola da morte; il nome di Sarra vuol dir Principessa, et Ester fù Regina, quella santa, e virtuosa, questa pia, e da bene; così V.S. cerca quella, e questa nella bontà, nella virtù, e nella grandezza dell'animo imitare. Piaccia al Signore concederle sempre prosperità, e bene, perche possi avanzarsi tuttavia di bene in meglio con vita felice." (Modena 1619, *Dedication to Sarra Copio*)

portrays her as the “iniquitous” enemy of Israel, the worthy descend of Nebuchadnezzar, because she influenced Ahasuerus’ decision to stop the reconstruction of the Temple allowed by Cyrus (Modena 1619, 1.2). In this, he agrees with the rabbinical tradition. While the Babylonian Rabbis refer to Vashti as a Babylonian Jewish-hater and a wanton woman who must be punished, the Jerusalem Rabbis describe her as a wise queen, whose only mistake was agreeing to the destruction of the Temple (Kadari 2009). But Modena, like Zethar, appears to be sympathetic with Vashti’s suffering. In 1.4, indeed, she is no longer the guilty queen who must be rightly punished, but an innocent victim, whose only fault was to have been born female. In 2.1, Mordecai, then, employs tragic irony, providing a further image of Vashti:

qual peccato,  
 Enorme, qual delitto, ho mai commesso?  
 . . .  
 Io per usar tropp’honestà punita,  
 E di qual pena atroce? e qual severo  
 Castigo, che il privarmi della vita,  
 Nulla stato sarebbe, al par di questa,  
 O Vasti, è ver, che non sei più Regina?  
 Donna volgar, donna, donna più vil che serva  
 ...  
 Irato certo [i.e. il cielo], e la cagione ignoro  
 (Modena 1619, 2.1)

[What terrible sin, what crime, have I ever committed? . . . I was punished for being too honest. But how terrible is my pain, how severe my punishment! Taking life away from me would have been nothing when compared to this. Oh Vashti, truly you are no longer Queen? A vulgar woman, a woman viler than a servant . . . Of course, the heaven is angry, but the reason I ignore. (translation mine)]

Vashti is ready to leave the Palace with her foster-mother and complains of her misfortune: “O come male il piè si move, quando / Il cuor, ad altra parte è volto” (Modena 1619, 2.1; “How feet move badly, when heart is turned elsewhere”, translation mine). Her complaint echoes the lines from the poem *Libi beMizrah* (*My Heart in the East*) of the Hebrew poet, Yehudah Ha-Lewi (1086-1141): “My heart in the East but the rest of me in the West” (Halkin 2011, 21), as if Modena were transfiguring her misfortune and suffering within the perennial Jewish drama of expulsion and loneliness.

In portraying Vashti, Modena interweaves Jewish sources (Midraš Esther Rabbah, Babylonian- and Jerusalem-Talmud, and, probably, also Yehudah Ha-Lewi) and sixteenth-century Italian tragedy. Not surprisingly,

then, his Vashti has an irresolute and multifaceted character. On the one hand, she is a tragic persona, whose sorrow (for a deliverance that never took place) and distress (for a lost past) exemplifies the destiny of women and the destiny of Jewish people in exile. On the other hand, she is an ambiguous character embodying both the status of the guilty enemy and the innocent victim.

In 1.4 Vashti expresses the status of woman, by saying: “rinchiusa / In casa, ò d’alte mura circondata” (Modena 1619, 1.4; “locked inside the house, or surrounded by high walls”, translation mine). Similarly, Israel is confined to the ghettos. Modena recognizes in the character of Vashti the Jewish people, as the ‘woman’ of the world: victim, vulnerable, and vehicle for divine (Frymer-Kensky 2002, 337). The image of ‘Israelite-woman’ thrown among strangers or hostile male powers recalls a passage in Yehudah Ha-Lewi’s *Sefer ha-Kuzari* (*The Book of the Khazar King*),<sup>4</sup> in which the Rabbi (or *Haver* in the Hebrew translation) points out to the king of the Khazars:

אמר החבר: ישראל באמות כלב באברים, הוא רב חליים מכלם ורב בריאות מכלם.

[The *Haver* said: “Israel amidst the nations is like the heart amidst the organs of the body: the sickest and the healthiest of them”. (*Sefer ha-Kuzari* 2.36; cf. Yehudah Ha-Lewi 1905. Translation mine)]

It is not my aim here to deal with the influence of Yehudah Ha-Lewi in Modena’s work. Leon Modena knew the *Kuzari* well: he compiled a stand-alone index to the *Kuzari*, and he borrowed its language and arguments in his attack against *Qol Šakhal’s* author (Shear 2008, 100-1, 173). What is noteworthy is the fact that Modena’s use of *Kuzari* suggests the compatibility between “participation in general humanist discourse and polemical defence of Judaism” (Shear 2008, 103).

Modena made an extensive use of non-Jewish sources to describe the tragic nature of Vashti. In 1.4, for example, Vashti’s lamenting her misfortune is imbued with references to Italian tragedy and pastoral poetry, such as Giovan Battista Giraldi’s *Orbecche* (1541) and Torquato Tasso’s pastoral play, *Aminta* (1573). And yet, Modena borrows his idea of female beauty as a harmful gift from Tasso’s tragedy *Il re Torrismondo* (*King Torrismondo*) (1587). Like Rosmonda, Vashti laments:

Perche, lassa, non nacqui maschio anch’io?

<sup>4</sup> Originally written in Judeo-Arabic at the end of 1130s, the work circulated among Jewish in Latin Christendom in the Hebrew translation by Yehudah Ibn Tibbon (1120-1190), under the title *Sefer ha-Kuzari* or *Sefer ha-Kuzar* (*The Book of the Khazar*). Cf. Shear 2008, 21-54.

...  
 M'havessi, almeno la Natura dato  
 ...  
 ... la sembianza infin di un mostro horréndo,  
 Che così la beltà, la beltà frale,  
 Dono infelice, à donna saggia, e casta,  
 Non havrebbe hora mosso, il Rè marito  
 (Se marito da me deve chiamarsi)  
 A si illecita cosa, commandarmi  
 (Modena 1619, 1.4)

[Oh miserable, why wasn't I born male too . . . If nature had at least given me . . . finally, the appearance of a hideous monster, so that the beauty, the ephemeral beauty – a wretched gift, for a wise and chaste woman – would never have moved the King, my husband (if I have still to call him a husband) to command me a so illicit thing. (translation mine)]

Supposedly, Vashti's 'suicide' is Modena's invention: there is no mention of Vashti's suicide in rabbinic literature (at least, in the midrashim, Vashti dies at the hands of Ahasuerus who had drunk so much that he could not separate good and bad, life and death; cf. Kadari 2009). In fact, suicide is a recurrent motif of Italian Renaissance tragedy (Bianchi 2014, 199-214; cf. Carta 2018). But what is peculiar to Modena's *Ester* is that it opens with the suicide of Vashti. As if her death were a reminder that too uncompromising a personality (both individual and collective) is destined to self-destruction. One may construe Vashti's suicide as a warning both to Sarra Copio Sullam and to Jewish people "to cultivate a realistic perception of the world" (Arbib 2003, 130). Similarly, the foster-mother recommends to Vashti:

Cara Regina mia, meglio era forse  
 Ubidir, che del Prencipe, e marito,  
 Ò giusta, ò ingiusta, che la voglia sia,  
 Si dee seguir.  
 (Modena 1619, 1.4)

[My dear queen, perhaps it would have been better to obey, since the will of a sovereign and husband, whether right or wrong, must be followed. (translation mine)]

"Vashti's foster-mother represents popular wisdom, which is accustomed to the injustice of power" (Arbib 2003, 127). Her words echo the prejudice, according to which nature has predisposed woman to obey because of her inferiority to man. It should be added that some twenty years before Modena's *Ester*, Giuseppe Passi had published in Venice his misogynistic catalogue *I donneschi difetti* (*The Defects of Woman*) (1599). He deemed Vashti

an arrogant woman, who was repudiated for disobeying her husband; her punishment was meant as a warning to all married women.<sup>5</sup> In this framework, Modena's Vashti purports both to open "Sarra Copio Sullam's eyes" to women's actual condition (Arbib 2012) and to warn the Jews (particularly the Venetian Jews) against the risks of a Judaism that remains poorly integrated in Christendom. Vashti serves as an instrument of denunciation, thereby drawing attention both to the female and to the Jewish condition. On the contrary, Esther appears as a 'creative mediator', capable of offering a deflationary model of female heroism and covenantal Judaism. Indeed, unlike Vashti, the pious and taciturn Esther willingly assents to hide her true nature (i.e. her Jewishness) and to obey another's will.

### 3. Redemption Behind Multiple Masks

In *L'Esther* Leon Modena introduces male characters (Mordecai, Ahasuerus and his two ministers, Memucan and Carshena) as the protagonists of a multi-voiced debate on theologico-political issues, such as the limits of the human ruler, the Jewish otherness and chosenness, and the messianic redemption. The background for this debate is the weakness of courtly power. The first thing that catches the eye is that Ahasuerus is portrayed in a negative light. Zethar, the eunuch, includes Ahasuerus among those princes "who, being lords, believe that anything benefits them, that it is right and proper to force it on others, and expect it done" ("... Che perche Signor sono, gli par che tutto / Convenevol gli sia, lecito, e giusto, / Imponer ad altrui, ...", Modena 1619, 1.3; translation in Arbib 2003, 123); Vashti says that he is unworthy of the crown he wears (Modena 1619, 1.4);<sup>6</sup> the manservants describe him as a dishonest and arrogant tyrant who should be put to death (Modena 1619, 2.6);<sup>7</sup> Haman ascribes to him a mercurial and capricious na-

<sup>5</sup> "... la regina Vasti, essendo stata chiamata dal marito Assuero, acciò che fusse veduta bella, com'era con la corona Regale in capo da tutti i popoli, e da li Primati suoi, et havendo lei ruscato di venire, fù col consiglio dei savi rifiutata dal marito . . . Con questo esempio dovrebbero tutte le donne maritate imparare ad ubidire ai consorti loro, et à portargli quella riverenza, e quel onore, che ragionevolmente gli debbono" (Passi 1618, 20. Published for the first time in 1599, Passi's work went through three additional editions in 1601, 1605, and 1618). Cf. Passi 1602, 158; Malpezzi Price-Ristaino 2008, 105-19.

<sup>6</sup> "Dario . . . A questo Assuero, suo figliuol, mi diede / Per moglie, indegno di corona, e scettrò / Che sol per me, tien hor l'imperio in mano / De Medi, e non pel padre, et hà acquistato / Per essermi marito, anco la Persia, / Più che per suo valore, ò per sua forza".

<sup>7</sup> "Perche quest'insolente, hora accecato / Dal fumo della sua superbia immensa, / E divenuto insopportabil troppo"; "dar la morte ad un simil tiranno, / E chi lo potrà far meglio di noi?".



ture, deeming him a haughty and bed-tempered king (Modena 1619, 3.2);<sup>8</sup> in the minister Memucham's words, Ahasuerus' choice to exterminate an innocent people is "an unjust and unworthy deed" ("atto ingiusto, e indegno", Modena 1619, 3.5; translation mine).<sup>9</sup> The remark of the minister Carshena is noteworthy in this regard. In 3.5 Carshena defines Ahasuerus as a "foolish lord" (ibid.): by placing Haman's desire to exterminate the Jews before the 'reason of state', he shows little consideration for the Persian people. In other words, Ahasuerus made the mistake of not looking at the cultural and political interest of the Empire (Syros 2005, 157-82. Cf. Botero 2017). Similarly, a few years later, in his *Discorso circa il stato de gl'Hebrei et in particular dimoranti nell'inclita città di Venetia (Discourse on the State of the Jews)* (1638), Simone Luzzatto would outline the crucial role of the Jews in preserving social stability. They are to be tolerated for their being "submissive, humble, and pliable to the will of *their* prince" (italics mine):<sup>10</sup>

Ma la nazione hebrea dispersa, e disseminata per il mondo, priva d'alcun capo di protetione, con pronta flessibilità si dispone sempre in conformità de pubblici comandi, onde si pratica bene spesso ch'essendo imposti agravii particolari alla nazione non si sente da essi spirare, et esprimere in semplice ramarico. (Luzzatto 1638, 22r)

[The Jews, however, were always willing to obey public commands with swift compliance, for they are dispersed and scattered all over the world and deprived of any source of protection, so that when particular taxes were imposed on them, they never dared to utter or formulate so much as a simple complaint. (translation in Veltri-Lissa 2019, 57)]

Carshena examines at least four reasons why Jews' presence should be tolerated within the Persian empire. The first reason is that misfortune has always fallen upon the enemies of Israel (ranging from Pharaoh to Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar): "L'esperienza hà dimostrato sempre / Pessimo fine a chi l'offese, o punse" (Modena 1619, 3.5; "Experience has always punished those who have offended or tested it", translation mine). The second is that "quel ch'il tempo ha lungamente al mondo / Conservato . . . Non

<sup>8</sup> "Poscia, che'l nostro Rè deve uscir fuori, / A far ch'allegro di vederlo, sia / Il popol, che sia hora è stato mesto, / Siche hor c'ha preso moglie, e c'ha quietata / La travagliata mente, hor che sta lieto, / Vuol far mille esentioni, e mille gratie".

<sup>9</sup> "Ma chi non sà che atto ingiusto, e indegno, / E di qual si sia Prencipe, a richiesta, / Ad appetito d'un, dieci, nè venti, / Esterminare un popolo innocente, / chi verso la corona errore alcuno / Non hà commesso ò da gli Dei, ò'l fato, / Mandato, a ricovrarsi, a l'ali, a l'ombra / De l'imperio di quello, e ritrovarsi / Da la fede regal, traditi, a fraude?".

<sup>10</sup> "La nazione hebrea è per se stessa somnessa, sogetta, e pieghevole, all'ubbidienza del suo Prencipe" (Luzzatto 1638, 31v; "The Jewish Nation is by itself submissive, humble, and pliable to the will of its prince", translation in Veltri-Lissa 2019, 83).



si deve gettar” (ibid.; “What has been preserved in the earth for a long time . . . should not be thrown away, translation mine), namely Israel has been preserved throughout history, therefore has to be protected. The third is a more politico-utilitarian reason: a people who increase the king’s renown and reputation must be welcomed into a pluralistic society such as the Persian empire (Modena 1619, 3.5).<sup>11</sup> Finally, anticipating Luzzatto’s utilitarian argument for Jewish toleration, Carshena adds that the Jews are to be accepted because they are a humble and obedient people who never rise against their rulers:

Si trovarono mai forse gli Hebrei  
 In lor captivitati, e soggettioni,  
 Seditiosi, e traditor, rubelli,  
 C’habbiano fatto Capo, e sollevati  
 Si sian contro il lor Prencipe, ò Signore?  
 Questo non già, ma pecorelle humili,  
 Viver ubidienti  
 (Modena 1619, 3.5)

[Have there ever been Jews who, in captivity and submission, have become seditious, traitors, rebels, or who turned against their prince or lord? This never happened. Rather they are humble sheep who live obediently. (translation mine)]

Carshena is not endorsing the Jewish people. While he admits to hating them because of their religion and rites, he has reservations about Ahasuerus’ choice to pander to Haman’s will, thus decreeing the Jews’ annihilation. Their presence in Persia does not conflict with the *raison d’état*, which must be always followed “Quand’habbia fondamento, e non ripugni / Alle divine, alle celesti leggi” (ibid.; “when it is well founded and does not offend the divine, heavenly laws”; translation in Arbib 2003, 134).

Unlike Ahasuerus, Mordecai is portrayed in a positive light: he is a pious Jew whose main concern is to ensure the well-being and the survival of the Jewish people. Mordecai agrees that a faithful servant like Esther is entrusted to the hands of the foreign and idolatrous Ahasuerus, as long as she will continue to observe all the precepts while hiding her Jewishness from her husband and courtiers. He has full confidence in God’s providence and strongly supports the eternity of Israel. Thus, in 2.5 he concludes his speech with the hope that everything turns out well for the Jewish people: “Fa che

<sup>11</sup> “Sia quanto vil una nation si voglia, / Sia quanto bassa, apporta al Re grandezza, / Magnificenza, è gran decor, tenerla / Ne le cittadi sue, che varie genti, / Popoli varij, e varie lingue havesse / Per suoi vassalli, e beneficio, e honore, / E tanto grande più, quanto più sono”.

per ben del popolo tutto sia” (Modena 1619, 2.5; “Let everything be for the well-being of the people”, translation mine).

At the Persian court, however, Mordecai appears as an obedient and cunning courtier, whose immediate concern is to guarantee social peace and harmony, and to prevent seditious conspiracies, both inside and outside the Persian palace. In some cases, Modena's Mordecai epitomizes two Jewish characteristics that, a few years later, Simone Luzzatto would outline in his *Discorso*: obedience and submission. Thanks to Esther's mediation, indeed, Mordecai denounces the conspiracy against the King, plotted by two manservants. He is interested in showing himself a loyal courtier, hoping that, by doing so, Ahasuerus would be more tolerant of the Jews.

Modena's Mordecai moves between opposite poles: obedience and disobedience; political realism and utopian vision of the future; strategy and prayer of prophecy. He symbolizes the ‘wandering Jew’ who lives a ‘two-hats’ existence, as both a cunning courtier and a devoted Jew. One example may explain his twofold nature. In 4.1 Mordecai's soliloquy conveys the impression that he is translating his political realism and foresight into an intimate prayer addressed to God. It is noteworthy that the prayer takes up some traits of the Septuagint version of Esther, particularly, addition C, which follows 4:17 (Vulgate 13:8-18) and tells the prayer of Mordecai and the prayer of Esther, asking for the safety of the Jews. Nevertheless, Modena gives his peculiar Jewish twist to the prayer. First, he reminds God of the promise He made to the prophet Jeremiah, namely that a freed Israel will return to Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup> Second, he questions Israel's loneliness and suffering, and appeals to God's providence and omnipotence (thanks to which the Jew have survived the flood, the slavery, and the wandering through the desert).<sup>13</sup> Finally, Mordecai gives the reason for his refusal of *proskynesis* before Haman (*Esth* 3:2). His explanation is similar, in some respects, to the one given in LXX. Whereas the Masoretic text is laconic, LXX's Addition C (also mirrored in the Vulgate) provides a key of interpretation:<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> “O gran Monarca, ò Dio verace, ò sommo / Rè del Mondo, non hai tu per la bocca / Promesso già, di Gieremia Profeta, / Ch'al fin di settant'anni il popol tuo / Susciterai, da l'esser sottoposto / A l'empia Babilonia, e che farai, / Ch'anco a Gierusalem facci ritorno / Redificando ancora il sacro Tempio?” (Modena 1619, 4.1).

<sup>13</sup> “Son queste le promesse? è questo il tempio? / Tu non sei già Signor, un'huom mortale, / Le cui parole possan venir meno, / E debbo creder io, che tu abbandoni / E lasci affatto questo popol tuo? / Popolo eletto sol da te fra gl'altri, / Per cui tanti miracoli hai già fatto . . . Tu che Noè da l'acque sol servasti . . . Tu ch'Abraam, da Nembrot posto nel foco / Rendesti salvo... Partisti il rubeo mar per farci varco, / Perche i corpi divisi hora da l'alme / Passar dovesser crudelmente a morte? Dov'è quando di manna nel deserto / Li pascesti, e dal duro sasso l'acqua / Facesti scaturir per essi, ch'ora / Debban così finire il cibo, e'l bere?” (Modena 1619, 4.1).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Fox 2010, 41-6; Berlin 2001, 32-6; Levenson 1997, 66-9.

Cuncta nosti, et scis quia non pro superbia et contumelia, et aliqua gloriae cupiditate, fecerim hoc, ut non adorarem Aman superbissimum . . . sed timui ne honorem Dei mei transferrem ad hominem, et ne quemquam adorarem, excepto Deo meo.

(Vulgate 13:12-14)

[You know all things. You know, Lord, that it was not out of insolence or arrogance or desire for glory that I acted thus in not bowing down to the arrogant Haman . . . But I acted as I did so as not to place the honor of a mortal above that of God. I will not bow down to anyone but you, my Lord. (New American Bible: chap. C, 5-7)]

Similarly, Modena's Mordecai specifies that his refusal of *proskynesis* was not the consequence of his "pride" and "ambition". Rather, he refuses to bow to Haman because of the idols that hung around Haman's neck.<sup>15</sup> Quite likely, Mordecai's explanation is based on Esther Rabbah (as well as on Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentaries on the Book of Esther),<sup>16</sup> where it is said that Haman had an image "embroidered on his clothing and on his chest, so that anyone who bowed to him effectively bowed to his idol" (Esth. Rabbah 7:5; cf. Walfish 1989, 337; 1993, 179; Fox 2010, 43; Ginzberg 2003, 1148-50).

Therefore, Mordecai refused to bow to Haman to avoid paying to a man the tribute due to God. In this regard, Abraham Ibn Ezra, while agreeing with the rabbinic viewpoint, emphasized Mordecai's pride and religious intransigence:

היה ראוי שיִדבר לאסתר ותסירנו משער המלך ולא יכעיס את המן אחר שראה|שהשעה משחקת לו?

[He should have requested that Esther have him removed from the palace gate so that he would not irritate Haman who was enjoying a rise in his fortunes at the time. (translation mine)]<sup>17</sup>

Anyway, it is noteworthy that Modena's Mordecai concludes his prayer with a reminder of Abraham's questioning God's attribute of justice. The patriarch criticized God's right to destruct Sodom and Gomorrah, killing the righteous along with wicked people: "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to make the innocent die with the guilty, so that the innocent and the guilty would be treated alike! Should not the judge of all the world act

<sup>15</sup> " . . . ch'il ricusare / Io d'inchinarmi a Aman, e riverirlo, / Non da superbia, ò ambition è nato / . . . Ma perche di richiamo nel vestito, / E al collo appesi gl'Idoli suoi porta, / A quai sotto pretesto alcun vietasti / À noi, mai dar d'honor minimo segno" (Modena 1619, 4.1).

<sup>16</sup> Comm. A, 3:2-3, comm. B, 3:4. Cf. Gomez Aranda 2007, 42 (Hebr. 14), 136 (Hebr. 49).

<sup>17</sup> Comm. A, 3:4. In Gomez Aranda 2007, Hebr. 14.

with justice?" (*Gen* 18:25). Abraham's challenging God may be considered a "prayer", a righteous act (for which the patriarch will be rewarded), because it aims at confirming the divine justice (Weiss 2017, 89-93; cf. *Gen. Rabbah* 49:9). The same thing applies to Mordecai's speech in 5.2. By giving expression to the shared suffering of the Jewish people, he warns God that, if He does not intercede, a radical new exile could begin:

Affanno sopra affanno, . . .  
 . . .  
 . . . essend'anco distrutta  
 La gran Città de nostri Padri antichi,  
 E calpestato, e rovinato il Tempio.  
 Hora di novo Aman cerca ad un tratto  
 Farne uccidere a tutti, e sradicare  
 Dal mondo . . .  
 . . .  
 A che tardi, Signore, dunque a che tardi?  
 (Modena 1619, 5.2)

[How many troubles . . . the great City of our ancient fathers is destroyed, the Temple is trampled and wrecked . . . Now Haman tries again to kill us all and to eradicate us from the world . . . Why do you hesitate, oh Lord, why do you hesitate? (translation mine)]

Mordecai's speech is suddenly interrupted by an angel, as if he were living an experience of prophecy. Turning to him, the angel says:

Raffrena il tuo dolore,  
 Ch'avanti il gran Motore  
 Son giunt'i prieghi tuoi, et ei concessa  
 T'ha hor hor la tua dimanda,  
 E sol per consolarti a te mi manda,  
 E a dirti, ch'egli con la sua clemenza  
 Hor hà quella sentenza  
 Rivocat'aspra, e forte,  
 Che minacciava a te col popol morte.  
 (Modena 1619, 5.2)

[Restrain your grief, since the great Mover has heard and accepted your prayers. He sent me only to reassure you and tell you that, thanks to His mercy, He revoked the harsh and severe sentence, which threatened to exterminate you and your people. (translation mine)]

Once again, Abraham seems to be hidden behind Mordecai. The passage echoes the episode of the binding of Isaac of *Gen* 22: at the very last moment, God sends an angel to interrupt Abraham's attempted sacrifice of his

son. Two things stand out here. The first is that Mordecai epitomizes the incessant tension between an obedient, submissive nature and the impulse to dispute and disobey (bequeathed by Abraham). The second thing is the focus on the ‘urgency of the moment’ – as if, at the very last moment, God would intercede to save His people, whose loyalty has been severely tested.

Modena’s *Ester* appears as a ‘diasporic’ tragedy that focuses on the present, providing lessons on how to survive in one’s own time and place. Political realism is preferred to utopian redemption. However, in 3.1 one possibly finds a slight hint that a ‘Jewish’ redemption will take place in the future. Here Mordecai gives voice to the hope that, as soon as the exile ends, a period of peace and abundance will begin. The Jews will return to their ‘ancient empire’, in which they will be concerned only with the observance of the Torah’s precepts. By living in such way, they will be able to achieve the union with the “higher mover”.<sup>18</sup> Apparently, Modena incorporates mystical, Neoplatonic elements (namely the conjunction with the “One” as the highest good) into his political realism. He borrows his view of redemption from Moses Maimonides (1138-1204), who pointed out that:

לא נתאוו החכמים והנביאים ימות המשיח. לא כדי שישלטו על כל העולם. ולא כדי שירדו בעכו"ם. ולא כדי שינשארו אותם העמים. ולא כדי לאכל ולשתות ולשמח. אלא כדי שיהיו פנויין בתורה וחכמתה.

[The Sages and the Prophets did not long for the days of the Messiah because they wanted to rule the world or because they wanted to have dominion over the non-Jews or because they wanted the nations to exalt them or because they wanted to eat, drink and be merry. Rather, they desired this so that they would have time for Torah and its Wisdom. (*Mišneh Torah, Sefer Šofetim, Melakhim u-Milḥamot* 12.4. Translation in Mošeh ben Maymon 2012)]

Predominantly, Maimonides focused on the ‘restorative’ aspects of the messianic era: the *return* of the kingdom of David to its former glory, the *re-building* of the Temple in Jerusalem and, finally, the *gathering* of the dispersed people of Israel. It should be also added that, for Maimonides, the messiah will establish a sort of *Pax Judaica* – but only as long as the nations will recognize Israel’s sovereignty and further the spread of universal monotheism. In the wake of Maimonides, Modena confines his idea of

<sup>18</sup> “E spero in breve, che potremo ancora / Alla patria tornar, poi che passati / Son quegl’anni, che prescritti furo, / Della captività, di Babilonia . . . Fà che le pure vittime, e holocausti, / Possiamo riofferirti, et i comandi / Tutti osserrar della tua santa legge, / Che’l desiderio intento, ch’in noi vive, / Di ritornare al nostro imperio antico, / Non è per dominar temporalmente, / Ove il padron è più del servo, servo, / Ma solo per poter liberi, all’hora, / Dalle occupation, che n’interrompono / Compita osservation, dar à precetti / Tutti quanti, e con cuor sincero, e chiaro, / Congiungerci con tè, motor soprano” (Modena 1619, 3.1).

redemption to a more ethical-cultural sphere – partly also inspired by certain Italian Jewish writers, such as Ovadia Sforno (1475-1550).<sup>19</sup> Indeed, for Modena, the Jews will return to the Land of Israel, not to dominate over the non-Jewish nations, but to achieve their own moral and intellectual perfection (Guetta 2014, 150). Therefore, his longing for Jerusalem appears to be nothing more than a private outburst against any religious and political restlessness.

Modena's 'diasporic' tragedy *Ester* serves several purposes: it provides lessons on how to survive in one's time and place; it teaches political realism, while conveying an inclusive and pluralistic view of society; it warns Sarra Sullam Copio against the risks of her correspondence with Cebà and her feisty 'feminism'. However, what strikes most is that *Ester* is a multi-voiced play, which is looking for a balance between opposite polarities: submissiveness and moral resistance; political despair and unrealistic redemption; covenantal pragmatism and Abrahamitic religiousness. Most conspicuous in this regard is Modena's Mordecai, who has inherited his moral resistance and religiosity from the patriarch Abraham. He typifies the 'wandering Jew' who lives a 'two-hats' existence, for his capacity to move between opposite poles: obedience and disobedience; political realism and messianic expectations; strategic cunning and prayer of prophecy. The figure of Vashti, on the other hand, stands out from the immorality of the court. Unlike Mordecai who acts as a figure of mediation, Vashti is an instrument of denunciation, thereby expressing the suffering of women and Jews, both confined to a secondary role in the society. Esther remains in the background. She is Vashti's double: the veiled and taciturn instrument of another's will, urged to complete and strengthen the legacy of the matriarch Sarah.

## Works Cited

- Arbib, Marina. 2012. "Exploring Religious Tolerance Through the Heroines of Purim". Haaretz, March 09.  
<https://www.haaretz.com/1.5203813> (Accessed 30 March 2020).
- 2003. "The Queen Esther Triangle, Leon Modena, Ansaldo Cebà, and Sara Copio Sullam". In Malkiel 2003, 103-35.
- 1999. "Rivisitando la biblica Ester: implicazioni sottese all'immagine femminile ebraica nell'Italia del Seicento". In *Le donne delle minoranze. Le ebreo e le protestanti d'Italia*, edited by Claire E. Honess and Verina R. Jones, 143-56. Torino: Claudiana.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Guetta 2015; Fishman 2003, 183-94.

- Berlin, Adele. 2001. *JPS Bible Commentary – Esther*. Philadelphia (PA): Jewish Publication Society.
- Bianchi, Alessandro. 2014. “Personaggi (e questioni) femminili nelle versioni drammatiche secentesche del libro di Ester. I. Vasti”. *Cahiers d'études italiennes* 9, 199-214.
- Botero, Giovanni. 2017. *The Reason of State (Della Ragion di Stato, 1589)*. Translated by Robert Bireley. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Carta, Ambra. 2018. *La morte tragica nel Cinquecento Poetiche a confronto in Trissino e Tasso*. Pisa: ETS.
- Cebà, Ansaldo. 1623. *Lettere d'Ansaldo Cebà Scritte a Sarra Copia e dedicate a Marc'Antonio Doria*. Genova: per Giuseppe Pavoni.
- Copio Sullam, Sarra. 1621. *Manifesto di Sarra Copia Sulam Hebraea. Nel quale è da lei riprovata, e detestata l'opinione negante l'Immortalità dell'Anima, falsamente attribuitale dal Sign. Baldassare Bonifaccio*. Venezia: per Antonio Pinelli.
- Fishman, Talya. 2003. “Changing Early Modern Jewish Discourse About Christianity: The Efforts of Rabbi Leon Modena”. In Malkiel, 159-94.
- Fortis, Umberto. 2003. *La “bella ebraea” Sara Copio Sullam poetessa nel ghetto di Venezia del '600*. Torino: Silvio Zamorani Editore.
- Fox, Michael. 2010. *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther. Second Edition with a New Postscript on a Decade of Esther Scholarship*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. 2002. *Reading the Women of the Bible*. New York, NY: Schocken Books.
- Ginzberg, Louis. 2003. *The Legend of the Jews*. Translated from the German Manuscript by Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin, vol.1. Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society.
- Gomez Aranda, Mariano, ed. 2007. *Dos Comentarios de Abraham Ibn Ezra al libro de Ester. Edición crítica, traducción y estudio introductorio*. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas.
- Guetta, Alessandro. 2015. “Maimonideanism in the Renaissance”. In *Encyclopedia of Renaissance Philosophy*, edited by Marco Sgarbi. Cham: Springer.
- 2014. “Leone Modena’s Magen we-ḥerev as an Anti-Catholic Apologia”. *Italian Jewry in the Early Modern Era: Essays in Intellectual History*, 134-152.
- Halkin, Hillel, ed. 2011. *The Selected Poems of Yehuda Halevi*. New York, NY: Nextbook Press.
- Harrán, Don, ed. 2009. *Jewish Poet and Intellectual in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Works of Sarra Copia Sulam in Verse and Prose, Along with Writings of Her Contemporaries in Her Praise, Condemnation, or Defense*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Kadari, Tamar. 2009. “Vashti: Midrash and Aggadah”. *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia. Jewish Women’s Archive*. <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/vashti-midrash-and-aggadah> (Accessed 30 March, 2020).
- Levenson, John D. 1997. *Esther*. Louisville-London: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Luzzatto, Simone. 2019. *Discourse on the State of the Jews*. Translated by Giuseppe Veltri, and Anna Lissa. Berlin-Boston, MA: Walter de Gruyter.



- 2013. *Scritti politici e filosofici di un ebreo scettico nella Venezia del Seicento*. Introduzione, note e apparati di Giuseppe Veltri con la collaborazione di Anna Lissa e Paola Ferruta. Milano: Bompiani.
- 1638. *Discorso circa il stato de gl'Hebrei et in particolar dimoranti nell'inclita città di Venezia*. Venezia: per Gioanne Calleoni.
- Malkiel, David, ed. 2003. *The Lion Shall Roar. Leon Modena and His World*. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press.
- Malpezzi Price, Paola, and Christine Ristaino, eds. 2008. *Lucrezia Marinella and the "Querelle Des Femmes" in Seventeenth-century Italy*. Madison-Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Modena, Leon. 2000. *Vita di Jehudà. Autobiografia di Leon Modena rabbino veneziano del XVII secolo*. Traduzione di Emanuele Menachem Artom. Introduzione di Umberto Fortis. Note di Daniel Carpi. A cura di Elena Rossi Artom, Umberto Fortis e Ariel Viterbo. Torino: Silvio Zamorani Editore.
- 1988. *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena's Life of Judah*. Edited and translated by Mark R. Cohen. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- 1619. *L'Ester: tragedia tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura*. Venezia: per Giacomo Sarzina.
- Mošeh ben Maymon. 2012. *Mišneh Torah, Sefer Šofetim, Melakhim u-Milhamot*. Translated by Reuven Brauner. [https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh\\_Torah\\_Kings\\_and\\_Wars](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah_Kings_and_Wars) (Accessed 30 March, 2020).
- Passi, Giuseppe. 1618. *I donneschi difetti*. Venezia: per Vincenzo Somascho.
- 1602. *Dello stato maritale*. Venezia: per Iacomo Antonio Somascho.
- Roth, Cecil. 1943. "'Salusque Lusitano' (An Essay in Disentanglement)". *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 34 (1): 65-85.
- Shear, Adam. 2008. *The Kuzari and the Shaping of Jewish Identity, 1167-1900*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Syros, Vasileios. 2005. "Simone Luzzatto's Image of the Ideal Prince and the Italian Tradition of Reason of State". *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*. 9: 157-82.
- Veltri, Giuseppe. 2009. *Renaissance Philosophy in Jewish Garb: Foundations and Challenges in Judaism on the Eve of Modernity*. Leiden: Brill.
- Walfish, Barry. 1993. *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of The Book of Esther in the Middle Ages*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- 1989. "The Two Commentaries of Abraham Ibn Ezra on the Book of Esther". *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 79 (4): 323-43.
- Weiss, Dov. 2017. *Pious Irreverence. Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism*. Philadelphia (PA): University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Westwater, Lynn Lara. 2020. *Sarra Copia Sulam: A Jewish Salonnière and the Press in Counter-Reformation Venice*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Yehudah Ha-Lewi. 1905. *Sefer ha-Kuzari*. Translated by Hartwig Hirschfeld. [https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer\\_ha-Kuzari?lang=bi&p2=Sefer\\_Kuzari.2.50&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer_ha-Kuzari?lang=bi&p2=Sefer_Kuzari.2.50&lang2=en) (Accessed 30 March 2020).
- Zavan, Gabriella. 2004. *Gli ebrei, i marrani e la figura di Salomon Usque*. Treviso: Santi Quaranta.





ZEHAVIT STERN\*

# The Archive, the Repertoire, and Jewish Theatre: Zygmunt Turkow Performs a National Dramatic Heritage

Abstract

How can one construct a dignified theatrical heritage in a culture with no dramatic canon, on-going theatrical institution or government support? Is it possible to create modernist theatre in a social environment eager for cheap entertainment? In this article I strive to address these questions through a close look at two multi-layered performances staged at the Warsaw *Tsentral Teater* (Central Theatre) in the 1923-1924 season: *Serkele* and *Der priziv* (*The Military Conscription*). Directed by Zygmunt Turkow and performed by a young ensemble that was about to evolve in the following year into the VYKT theatre (Warsaw Yiddish Art Theatre), these experimental shows re-claimed folk performance (and especially the *purim-shpil*) alongside nineteenth century Yiddish closet drama (written by Shloyme Ettinger and Sholem Yankev Abramovitch [Mendele Moykher-Sforim]). They thus drew on both the popular “repertoire” and the more prestigious “archive” of Yiddish theatre – to use Diana Taylor’s terms – enlisting the two opposite poles of her influential dichotomy for the sake of one common endeavour: to invigorate and elevate modern Jewish theatre. The theatrical events discussed in this paper, I argue, complicate and challenge Taylor’s theory and the common binaries on which she draws, such as “The West” vs. the “subaltern” or the colonizer vs. the colonized. Ultimately, Turkow’s efforts to enhance the viewers’ aesthetic sensibility and historical awareness shed light on the unique path of modern Yiddish culture and the stateless Jewish nationalism; its quest for a usable past and its heroic struggle to promote – or perhaps fabricate? – notions of cultural continuity.

KEYWORDS: Yiddish theatre, theatre, modernism, performance, Jewish nationalism, heritage, folklore, purim-shpil

## Introduction: The Interwar Heritage Revolution

It was in 1896 that the fifteen-year-old Noyekh Pryłucki watched a *purim-shpil* (a skit traditionally performed on the holiday of Purim) for the very first time. He must have been truly impressed, for he immediately transcribed the sketch in his notebook (Weiser 2011, 37). Viewing, admiring and documenting are all fundamentals of ethnographic fieldwork, and Pryłucki, who started collecting and translating Yiddish proverbs at the age of seven,

\* Tel Aviv University – zehavit.stern@gmail.com

indeed became a folklorist, historian, journalist, and theatre critic, as well as a political leader and a Sejm member (Weiser 2011, 32-5). In 1899, three years after the aforementioned 'ethnographic' experience, the young Pryłucki produced a performance based on his transcription of that *purim-shpil*. Later on, upon publishing his first collection of Yiddish folklore (*Yidishe folkslider*), he encouraged his readers to collect and send him *purim-shpiln* (plural of *purim-shpil*) alongside songs, folktales, and proverbs (Pryłucki 1911), and in the following year published the first annotated collection of *purim-shpiln* ever printed in Yiddish (Pryłucki 1912). Pryłucki's youthful encounter with the traditional *purim-shpil* thus marks the onset of his on-going fascination with the crude performance. Many other Yiddish scholars, artists and cultural activists, followed in his footsteps, including Yitskhok (Ignacy) Schiper (1923), Yankev Shatzky (1935) and Itzik Manger (1936).<sup>1</sup>

Pryłucki was by no means the first to document a *purim-shpil* performance. As early as 1716, Johann Schudt, a German scholar of Jewish folklore, collected, translated and published *purim-shpil* plays, that served to testify to an alleged Jewish inferiority (Schudt 1716, 4.309-10). In the realm of Jewish culture, Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (better known as Mendele Moykher Sforim) preceded Pryłucki's ethnographic endeavour in more than a decade by including a *purim-shpil* scene in his 1884 play *Der Priziv* (*The Military Conscription*) (Abramovitsh 1884). While sharing certain elements with Schudt's folkloristic perspective, the attitude of Abramovitsh and Pryłucki with regard to the *purim-shpil* tradition was essentially different. Born more than a half a century apart, these two prominent figures of Eastern European Jewish culture served as pioneers of a wave of fascination with the *purim-shpil*, a movement of re-discovery and re-imagination that began – like Jewish nationalism and in direct contact with it – in the 1880s, and culminated in the interwar era, when it ripened into a full-blown heritage revolution.

In Pryłucki's private collection, in a printed anthology of Jewish folklore or as a folkloristic vignette woven into a play – in all of these settings the *purim-shpil* had been documented, catalogued, 'preserved', imitated, and staged. The end of the nineteenth century thus signifies the beginning of the complex process, charged politically as well as aesthetically, by which the popular and ephemeral *purim-shpil* performance turned into a historical artefact and a source of national pride. In my forthcoming book, titled *The Birth of Theatre from the Spirit of Folk Performance: Eastern European Jewish Culture and the Invention of a National Dramatic Heritage* I examine this process and seek to understand when, how, and why artists and scholars began to document, re-imagine and re-enact the *purim-shpil*, formerly considered a low and even embarrassing form of entertainment. These various practices

<sup>1</sup> On the re-discovery of the *purim-shpil* in interwar Yiddish culture see Stern 2011.

of ‘reviving’ the folkish, humoristic, and often vulgar performance of the *purim-shpiler*, were all used, I argue, for the sake of the most solemn endeavour of constructing a national heritage. In the lack of a nation state, this enterprise was felt to be extremely urgent.

In this article I will focus on one particular case, exemplifying the process by which the repertoire becomes the archive, and the ugly *purim-shpil* duckling becomes the beautiful heritage swan; this example being Zygmunt Turkow’s 1923 production of Abramovitsh’s *Der priziv*, produced in the Warsaw *Tsentrāl teater* (Central Theatre), a short-lived theatre company that he founded together with his wife Ida Kaminska, and that would soon transform into the VYKT (*Varshever Yidisher Kunst Teater*), the Jewish Art Theatre of Warsaw. The show of Turkow’s *Der Priziv* aspired to enliven modern Yiddish theatre with folkish repertoire, namely the *purim-shpil*, but, somewhat paradoxically, resorted for that purpose to the work of Jewish authors and historians who re-discovered and re-evaluated the *purim-shpil*. I will examine *Tsentrāl teater*’s *Der Priziv* in conjunction with another show Turkow directed only a few months earlier, a production of Shloyme Ettinger’s *maskilic* drama *Serkele* (written in the years 1825-1830, published in 1861), a theatrical event which took, at least seemingly, the opposite direction, and sought to bring a sense of grandness and historical legacy into the low, wild and carnivalesque popular Yiddish theatre.

To help locate these multi-layered performances within a larger conceptual framework, I will engage in a dialogue with Diana Taylor’s influential dichotomy of “the archive” and “the repertoire”. While Taylor’s binary serves as a useful point of entry for my investigation, Turkow’s endeavours, as I will try to show, challenge Taylor’s model, expose its limitations and the underlying assumptions on which it is based. Taylor’s influential study *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003) explores a wide range of dramatic practices in the Americas, focusing on what she designates as encounters between the “repertoire” and the “archive”; the repertoire being a performance which serves as a socio-cultural ceremony – by nature dynamic, ephemeral, embodied, and time- and place-specific – and the archive would be the abode of supposedly objective and durable documents. Taylor lucidly presents a vast array of case studies and unveils the ambivalent and dynamic relation between the two poles of the archive and the repertoire. Two particularly telling examples are those of missionaries documenting a native culture while taking part in its destruction, and the 1992 “savage performance” (performed by Guillermo Gomez-Pena and Coco Fusco), in which two supposedly native Americans were displayed in a cage placed in the Smithsonian’s Museum of Natural History. Presented in a suggestive and nuanced manner, Taylor’s model is nonetheless based on the basic dichotomy of “us”, the documenting subjects, vs. “they”, the documented objects, a binary which adheres to the

more general opposition between the colonialist West and its Other. While “the archive” is identified with Western culture, supposedly speaking on behalf of the objective perspective of eternity, sanctifying documentation and often using it to control and exploit, “the repertoire” is considered to stand on the side of native consciousness, celebrating and even sanctifying temporal, local performance, considered a legitimate means for the formation of continuity and cultural memory. Like many historians, folklorists, and ethnographers, Taylor too is critical of what she considers to be the Western project of solidifying, documenting, archiving, and cataloguing live traditions, especially, of course, when it involves delegitimizing and even demolishing other ways of forming cultural memory.

The encounter between Jewish folk performance and the modern Yiddish artists who re-discovered, documented, and “revived” it suggests a transformation similar to the one described by Taylor, and criticized or parodied by some of the contemporary performance artists she examines: from the live, folkish, partly improvised performance to forms of conservation and exhibition. In this sense, the re-discovery of the traditional *Purim* performance (that is instances such as the *purim-shpil* embedded in Abramovitch’s *Der priziv*, or the ones transcribed in Prylucki’s folkloristic anthologies) may serve as yet another example of the dynamic relations between the repertoire and the archive, only in a different context: that of the Eastern European Jewish culture.

Notwithstanding the significant similarities between Taylor’s case studies and those analysed in this article, a closer look reveals noteworthy differences. The encounters between the repertoire and the archive in the realm of Eastern European Jewish culture is of a different sort than those described by Taylor or by Homi Bhaba, who famously coined the concepts of “mimicry” and “hybridity” to portray the complex relations between the colonizer and the colonized subject. In Eastern European Jewish culture, the distance between “we” who document and “they” who were being documented is significantly shorter than the one between the colonizer and the colonized, or between the Western and what is known in Postcolonial theory as “the subaltern”. First, in the Eastern European Jewish context “the folk” and the cultural activists who documented, archived, re-imagined, and reconstructed its “repertoire” (including the *purim-shpil*) belong to the very same ethnic group. In this sense, a closer parallel to the Eastern European Jewish case would be Russian culture, in which the “Other” from the perspective of the Russian “civilized” person (often referred to as “intelligent”) is not the colonized subject, but rather the Russian peasant, the *muzhik*. Yet even the Russian case differs considerably from the Jewish one. In Eastern European Jewish culture “the folk” and its leaders, writers, and archivists often belonged to the same socio-economic stratum, or at least originated in it. With

no aristocracy, Eastern European Jewish communities were generally less stratified than other European societies, and more open to social mobility – through learning or through financial gain (or loss). Thus, the gulf between Tolstoy and Gogol on the one hand and the *muzhik* on the other is far greater than whatever separates S. An-sky, Hayim Nahman Bialik, Sholem Aleichem, Mark Chagall, Al Lissitzky, and other high-brow Eastern European Jewish artists from the common people of the *shtetl*. Like their fellow “Jews of the whole year” (*yidn fun a gants yor*), as they are called in Yiddish, the modern and modernist artists and cultural activists of Eastern European Jewish culture were typically born and raised in Yiddish, in small towns of the Jewish Pale of Settlement, quite often also in poor families, with little or no education beyond traditional Jewish learning. The culture of the *shtetl*, including its most folkish and crude expressions, was theirs just as much as it belonged to ‘the masses’. Those who created the modern Jewish “archive”, to use Taylor’s terms, were therefore much closer to the “repertoire” they documented, re-imagined, and appropriated than the “archivists” Taylor discusses, or those who took part in the Russian nineteenth century wave of fascination with Slavic or Russian folklore (Figs 2002, 41-42, 111-114, 173-176, 199-203). The unique case of Eastern European Jewish culture thus calls for further consideration. What happens when the documented “Others” are to a large extent also the documenting “We”? How does this proximity between the repertoire and the archive manifests itself in the realm of Jewish theatre? What should we make of a ‘primitive’ performance, such as the *purim-shpil*, that is not quite ‘exotic’ but is rather, for better or worse, associated with “us”, the historians, cultural activists, theatre critics, directors, actors and audience? And finally, what are the ramifications of an encounter between the repertoire and the archive that is intimate, multi-directional, ambivalent, and even conflicted? In what follows I will seek to address these questions by exploring the rich and suggestive examples of the two aforementioned productions: *Serkele* and *Der priziv*. Ultimately, I argue, Turkow’s attempts at bringing together “the archive” and “the repertoire” – be it by means of the nineteenth century closet drama or the folksy *purim-shpil* – shed light on the unique nature of modern Jewish nationalism, and the special path taken by Yiddish culture in what regards the weighty tasks of nation building and cultural rejuvenation.

### **The Theatrical Event as A Historic Site: Serkele on Stage**

On Monday, 24 September 1923, the eve of *Succos* (the Jewish holiday of Tabernacles), a small ad was published in the Polish Yiddish language daily newspaper *Der moment*, calling on audiences to attend a performance of the

play *Serkele* with the renowned actress Ester-Rokhl Kaminska. In hope of filling up the modestly sized hall during the premiere and throughout the holidays of *Succos*, the ad called audiences to experience: “A festive production celebrating Yiddish Theatre’s Jubilee”. Anniversary celebrations were much loved within the Yiddish-speaking world, and especially in the realm of theatre, and an actress’ or a playwright’s birthday or *yortsayt* (anniversary of one’s death) were often commemorated. However, Yiddish theatre was, and still is, widely considered to have begun in 1876, the year Goldfadn first appeared on Shimen Mark’s *Green Tree* in Iași, Romania, and the year in which he started organizing his professional theatre. Yiddish theatre’s jubilee was thus to be celebrated only in 1926. Why, then, did *Tsentral Teater’s* advertisement cut out three whole years from Yiddish theatre’s chronology? The answer has probably to do with a certain historical urge, or a “will to heritage”, accompanied by a sense of urgency, that, as we shall see, was not only noticed in the ad’s subtitle but was also a salient element of the production as a whole.

The desire to crown the production of *Serkele* a historical event is notable also in preview articles published in both *Der moment* (*The Moment*) and in *Haynt* (*Today*), the two popular Yiddish daily newspapers, which pronounced enthusiastically the premiere to be held the next day. Under the title *A Holiday* (*a yontev*) Aren Aynhorn writes in *Haynt*: “Tomorrow is a holiday for Jewish theatre, and not only for the theatre, but for our young culture at large. The best way to tell that a national culture has some standing, that it blooms and grows, is when it stops living by the day and starts considering itself from a historical perspective” (Aynhorn 1923, 5). In *Der moment* Yoysef Khayim Heftman describes the production as “festive” and praises the theatre for putting on a play written a century ago, rather than behaving “like others in our ultra-modern times”, who strive to adopt the latest trends (Heftman 1923, 2). Heftman attaches another symbolic number to the play, declared a century old, and once again the anniversary is somewhat rushed, as the play was probably written between 1825-1830, and published only in 1861. Considering Heftman’s declaration we must keep in mind that the very idea of a hundred-year-old Yiddish play was regarded surprising, even bizarre. In the realm of Yiddish culture, a century-old play would be a true ‘pre-historic’ dinosaur, preceding not only the birth of Yiddish theatre, largely accepted to be 1876, but also the rise of modern Yiddish literature in the 1860s with the works of Abramovitsh, Yoyel Yitskhok Linetsky and Ayzek-Meyer Dik. The ads and previews take it for granted that only a few people were aware of the play so far, yet believe that this gap could soon be closed, and the play would become acclaimed – through educated newspapers articles and, of course, through the performance itself. By getting to know *Serkele* audiences, they predict, will gain “a historical perspective”, learn about the Jewish theatrical



tradition and strengthen their national awareness. This wishful attitude was expressed by journalists as well as by Turkow himself, who viewed the establishment of a historical awareness in the realm of theatre as “a question of national prestige and artistic necessity”, as he writes years later in his memoir (Turkow 1950, 137). Moreover, judging from the ads and the previews, the play was regarded a historic documentation of Jewish life of the preceding century, “the life of our grandmothers and grandfathers”, as Heftman writes, their cloths, customs and language. Little did it matter to him that *Serkele* was a didactic comedy, bordering on caricature, a combination of Moliere’s *Tartuffe* and Lessing’s bourgeois dramas, a satire portraying religious people as debased hypocrites and the *maskilim* as pure and holy. Heftman also mentions a previous production by the students of the Rabbinical Academy in Zhitomir in 1862, a pioneering adaptation embedded in cultural memory thanks to the fact that the leading role of *Serkele* was played by no other than Goldfadn, “the father of Yiddish theatre”, who, according to those who watched the show, performed exceedingly well (Berkowitz and Dauber 2006, 37). As part of the mythologization of Goldfadn’s life, some claimed that the aforementioned modest production had greatly affected Goldfadn’s decision to devote his life to the theatre, although it took him no less than a decade and a half thereafter to truly make up his mind. Whatever the case, it is clear that the previous amateur production of *Serkele* did not detract from *Tsentrāl teater*’s claim for originality. On the contrary, it even bestowed the play’s first professional production with further historical meaning.

It was with great enthusiasm that Turkow took upon himself history’s heavy burden. Turkow welcomed the possible inherent traits of the play and the challenges it raised for him as an actor and director. He was even more excited about *Serkele*’s historic allure and hoped it would attract audiences. While aspiring for artistic standing, the ensemble he and Ida Kaminska assembled over the previous years depended solely on ticket revenue.<sup>2</sup> Like the *VYKT* that followed it, the company that performed at the well located venue of *Tsentrāl teater* in the years 1921-1924, existed from hand to mouth, often collapsing and coming to life again. Every economic failure threatened to devastate the theatre; every schlager was performed until it completely exhausted its financial potential. Each failure forced the troupe to leave Warsaw and wander around ‘the province,’ as it was called, namely Jewish towns from Vilnius to Drohobitz. in search of livelihood (Turkow-Grudberg 1951, 59, 67). Turkow had thus also good practical reasons to turn the ‘historic value’ of the play into an asset and a prominent part of his dramaturgy.

<sup>2</sup> On history of the building known as “*Tsentrāl teater*”, located on Leshno Street, at the very heart of the more affluent part of the ‘Jewish’ area of Warsaw see Turkow-Grudberg 1968-1971, 82-102.

“True, the play’s theme (*sujet*) is not original”, he writes in his memoir, acknowledging the influence of Moliere’s *Tartuffe* and German bourgeois theatre, but Ettinger “managed to create from a foreign theme an original work, which can rightly represent our national classical comedy.” (Turkow 1950, 136; translation mine). The melodramatic plot, the *maskilic* didactic content, and even the unforgettable main character, one of the most colourful and evil women in Jewish drama, a villain who tries to deprive her niece of her inheritance, are all shadowed by the play’s historic weight. Turkow was less interested in *Serkele* herself – the character or the play – and more in *Serkele* the archival finding, that he considered a historical and national treasure and presented as such. The “repertoire” of modern Yiddish theatre, written originally as a closet drama, becomes in this case a site of memory, an archaeological or museological gesture. Turkow’s *Serkele* flaunts its archival origin while striving to become a milestone in the history of Yiddish theatre, a cornerstone of its dramatic canon or its canon to become.

Turkow’s archival approach to *Serkele* corresponds to the way he discovered the play. As he himself recalls, one day his friend Yankev Zusman, a Yiddish prose writer and a poet, reproached him by saying “what’s all this about Moliere, Gogol, Andreyev, for heaven’s sake, don’t we have Jewish writers?”. Following this remonstration Turkow started looking for old Yiddish plays. A friend suggested *Serkele* and got him a copy from Prylucki’s private collection, in Shloyme Ettinger’s own handwriting stamped by the Polish censor (Interestingly, Prylucki had obtained this manuscript from Abram Erenberg, the Warsaw Jewish censor in his time, who was married to Ettinger’s granddaughter, Turkow 1950, 138). The play thus made its way to Turkow’s hands as a precious archival object, an authentic item to be discovered, demonstrating direct and unmediated relation to its writer and bearing a clear historical footprint in the form of the censor’s stamp. This stamp tells of the relations between Jews and the Polish authorities as well as of the specific history of this play. Ettinger wished to print out the play, yet when he handed it to the Polish censor, as demanded, he received it with so many changes that he decided to give up on printing it. He hand-wrote dozens of copies, distributed them among his friends and acquaintances, and even organized reading events. The hand-written play is therefore an ‘ossified’ historic exhibit yet also evidence of a performative and subversive praxis.

This heavy historical burden shaped the production of *Serkele* in many ways. First, like theatre critics of his time, and despite the satirical and pedagogical nature of the play which he did acknowledge, Turkow considered *Serkele* an unmediated testimony of past life, describing it as a treasure containing Jewish existence, thoughts, ways of life, which could serve as a monument to their folklore and lifestyle. And indeed, Turkow made great efforts to turn the production into a ‘period piece’, a re-enactment of a specific Jew-

ish history. Yitskhok Shlosberg (1877-1930), a composer and conductor, had written the musical score, based on “old motifs from Galicia”; and a local *badkhn* researched historic materials of Galician *badkhonim* to form the humorous scene in which the *badkhn* sings to the bride (according to Aynhorn, this was one of the best scenes in the show; Aynhorn 1923, 5). The painter, graphic artist and set designer Moyshe (or Maurycy) Apelboym (1887-1931), who was greatly invested in Jewish folklore – he used motifs of traditional Jewish art in his work, alongside modernist elements such as cubism and expressionism, and occasionally painted synagogue murals – designed the set and costumes according to the fashion of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Apelboym was helped by the renown Polish-Jewish historian, Meir Balaban and by the Museum of the Jewish community in Warsaw, who provided him with sketches that assisted him in designing the set and costumes. A major challenge was posed by the language of the play, that was not only archaic and local (i.e. the Galician dialect) but also polyphonic: traditional Jews, *maskilim*, less educated *maskilim* or assimilated Jews all speak their own parlance in *Serkele*. Some spoke a higher register of Yiddish while others used a very plain one, some spoke Germanized Yiddish, while others spoke a Yiddish packed with Hebrew and Aramaic vocabularies. On this matter Turkow advised with the historian Yitzkhok Schiper, an expert of Jewish-Polish history, and a key figure in the ambitious common project of writing the history of Yiddish theatre and researching (or inventing) its origins in the faraway past. Schiper worked with the actors on language and elocution, turning the stage into a scientific laboratory in dialogue studies (Turkow 1950, 139) to accurately present the various characters in the play. Turkow realized that the play would be too “literary” for the Jewish public. *Serkele* is a family comic melodrama closer to Lessing’s bourgeois dramas than to Moliere’s stinging satires, and Turkow considered it too benign for an audience expecting, in his words, “schmaltz, singing, dance, fire and sulphur, strife and dispute” (1950). This was, he assumed, the reason theatres avoided it all those years. However, while economic pressures impelled Turkow and other Yiddish theatre directors to appeal to the audience’s taste, Turkow also took part in the endless campaign against commercial theatre’s *shund* (pulp) culture, led by theatre critics and certain directors and actors. He therefore hoped *Serkele* would be a fitting solution, “accessible, amusing, and at the same time educational”, as he writes in his memoir (Turkow 1961, 79).

Not all shared Turkow’s optimism and enthusiasm. What he considered a challenging play in terms of stylization and direction, yet offering undeniable historical allure, others saw as archaic, dull, and stale. It was not only the ‘common people’ and *shund* lovers who disliked the play, but also more

<sup>3</sup> For further reading on Apelboym see Malinowski 2017.

sophisticated theatre lovers, and even Turkow's actors themselves. When Turkow introduced his 'discovery' to the *Tsentrāl teater's* troupe and the venue's owners, he recounts, they compared *Serkele* to *mayse bikhalakh*, story books written for old Jews, or to foolish *Bobe mayses*, old wives' tales. Only during rehearsals did they change their mind.

The stage text itself presented the performance as an act of discovering a hidden treasure, or even a "resurrection" (Yiddish: *Tkhies hameysim*), in Turkow's terms (Turkow 1950, 141). A series of introductions framed the event as theatre within theatre. First came on stage – that is on the apron stage, in front of the still closed curtain – a comic actor playing Ettinger the playwright. Although Ettinger was a highly educated man, fluent in Yiddish, Hebrew, German, and Polish, a physician who studied at the university of Lemberg, he was portrayed lightly and humorously. This comic figure actually corresponded to the persona which the playwright used in the play, in the rhymed prologue that followed the style and convention of old Yiddish books. Another way of framing the show revealed itself when the curtain opened to show the actors blowing the dust off a huge book as if they were uncovering a treasure. When the book was opened the viewers saw an enlarged reproduction of the play's front page in Ettinger's handwriting.<sup>4</sup> This meta-theatrical act introduced the play's literary source (printed closet drama) into the show, and also shed light on the 'backstage' – the work of the historian, the archiver, and the director himself, who probe through the cultural assets of the past.

These two historiographical gestures were preceded by another, even more didactic, one. The evening opened with a short introduction by Schiper, who presented the playwright and the play as well as addressed Ettinger's eighty-year-old daughter invited to the premiere in the following grandiloquent words: "we bless the blood of the classic writer" (Zeitlin 1923, 6). Such passionate statements reveal the urgency and the challenge in creating a notion of cultural and national continuity, a sense of a live theatrical tradition which is actually based on 'dead' historic documents. The actual presence of Ettinger's daughter and the blood metaphor that serves to crown her strive to undermine the ossified nature of the historical finding and fabricate a living, organic connection between the archive and the repertoire.

Turkow tried to create such an organic affinity, historic but also bodily embedded, between his production and the history of Yiddish theatre also through Ester-Rokhl Kaminska, "The Mother of Yiddish theatre", who played the leading role. This symbolic gesture, however, came with a price, since Kaminska refused, or simply could not, dispense with her usual role as

<sup>4</sup> A photograph of *Serkele's* prologue, including the huge 'book' can be seen in Turkow 1950, 140.

a compassionated “mother” and play the shrew. Her stage persona was burdened by her “ghosting” (to use Marvin Carlson’s term, Carlson 2003, 1-15), and especially the role of *Mirele Efros*, the title character in Jacob Gordin’s renown play, sometimes referred to as “The Jewish Queen Lear”, which was the “most significant role in the mature phase of her career.” (Zer-Zion 2017, 473). Kaminska, so it seemed, was unable – or unwilling – to forsake the role of the victim for that of a witch. Was this one of the reasons for *Serkele*’s mere moderate success? *Serkele* was performed for a couple of months, about fifty shows, not quite a box-office disaster, but far removed from schlagers such as *The Miser* (an adaptation of Moliere’s famous play) or *Motke Ganev* (*Motke the Thief*, by Sholem Asch), which played for a whole year (starting in the 1921-1922 season). And, as the next tour of ‘the province’ revealed, *Serkele* was far less popular among audiences outside Warsaw, and the show was quickly banned from the travelling ensemble’s vast and varied repertoire (Shinar 1968-1971, 56).

Critics had varying opinions about the show. Aren Aynhorn of the *Haynt* claimed that *Serkele* had been “an artistic event, a historical cure for what was long neglected” (Aynhorn 1923, 5). He was also very impressed by the director’s skill in “transforming the past, that seems to us from afar grey and ossified . . . It is clear that the artist felt he was performing a holy task” (Aynhorn 1923, 5). Aren Zeitlin of the *Moment* was more reserved. Excited as he may have been by the historical significance of performing a hundred-year-old play, he could not avoid aesthetic judgment of the play itself that seemed to him “from an artistic perspective – weak. From a national perspective – strong” (Zeitlin 1923, 6). Zeitlin contended that the play presents a true image of past Jewish life, yet from a critical and one-sided point of view. He also criticized the dramaturgy and judged as unsuccessful Turkow’s effort to adapt the old play to the contemporary audience of Warsaw. If the masses found *Serkele* removed from the popular comic convention, to the educated Zeitlin it seemed “a light popular comedy. A burlesque of mishmash, laughter, naïve effects, and finally a naïve moral replete with a dance” (Zeitlin 1923, 6).

But the most interesting review that accurately and sensitively grasped the nature of the archival performance in *Serkele* was published in *Moment*, in the humoristic column “The Twisted Mirror”, by *Der tunkeler* (the pen name of Yoysef Tunkel, a Yiddish prose writer, poet and caricaturist):

Many of the audience don’t know what kind of a play it is and what you’d eat with it. Therefore, *Tsentral teater*’s management decided to place at the entrance the business manager and director that while asking for the tickets explains the essence of the play to each and every guest . . . The show you are about to watch ladies and gentlemen is not a usual one. It was written by Etinger, a dear man, a great writer, an “*intiligent*” (educated person) who lived five hundred years ago. His sister is sitting right here! The tickets! Tickets

please! *Panie* (Polish for sir), Sir, you are trying to sneak in without a ticket! Get out of here! Yes, my colleague Dr. Schiper discussed the play already, it is an historicistic [sic] play. With characteristic display of the psychology . . . Don't push! Tickets! You don't have tickets? Go to hell!  
(Tunkeler 1990)

*Der Tunkeler's* poignant satire mocks the desire to turn a plain comedy into a national-educational-historical performance, this on top of controlling the unruly masses who try to sneak into the theatre. The passion for a cultural past, the older the better, the academic emphasis, the desire to educate the audience, and the somewhat awkward execution of all this – these elements, which parodied so competently by *Der tunkeler*, catch the enormous gap between those high expectations and the rude, undisciplined public and the discourteous theatre manager and usher, who lectures and curses alternately.

*Serkele* was thus more than a production of a hundred-year-old play – whether marvellous or stale. It was first and foremost a performance of cultural continuity. It was a show of excavation, a project of resurrection, presenting itself as such and therefore expressing an extremely complex relation between the archive and the repertoire, here in the sense of the unruly and popular Yiddish stage. *Serkele* was a theatre production based on archival documentation that was transformed into a stage act, a representation of imagined historical continuity, a staging of national heritage.

### **The Repertoire, the Archive and Experimental Theatre: The Case of *Der priziv***

By the end of November 1923 *Serkele* went down.<sup>5</sup> The theatre's next production was *Mr. Tshu the Sinner*, a play by Julius Brestel that Ida Kaminska imported from Berlin, impressed by the *Volksbühne* production, starred by the German-Jewish renown actor Alexander Granach (Turkow 1961, 88-89). The success of this love melodrama relied on its exotic, supposedly Chinese, nature. Consulting no other than the Chinese consul in Warsaw, Turkow constructed a set abound with colourful lanterns and painted screens made of bamboo, and during performances chanted with Kaminska Chinese songs of longing, for which she had learned to play the Banjo.

Despite, and possibly because of all this, *Mr. Tshu* had been a box office failure, and already in December the desire to renew the Jewish repertoire

<sup>5</sup> Turkow initially introduced *Serkele* to the repertoire of the VYKT (Warsaw Yiddish Art Theatre), and the troupe performed it in 1924 in Łódź. However, while Łódź critics appreciated the historical play, it failed completely in terms of box-office, and was therefore quickly taken out of the VYKT repertoire (Shinar 1968-1971, 56).



and build a national theatrical heritage struck Turkow again. This time, as we shall soon see, he also felt the need to experiment with modernist theatrical means in the manner of the Russian theatre that he admired. Turkow turned once more to the archive, where he then found an old forgotten Jewish drama, this time Abramovitsh's play *Der priziv*. Differently from *Serkele*, a realistic production burdened with the task of a historical re-enactment, *Der priziv* was an experimental show, drawing inspiration from the archive as well as from the repertoire of traditional folk performance, while also adhering to contemporary modernist trends.

Like *Serkele*, *Der priziv* too was presented as "a historical document" by virtue of its age and the high standing of its author, known as the "grandfather" (*zeyde*) of modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature. Once again, the show was considered historical, first, because *Der priziv* had never before been performed on stage, and second, because of its content. Indeed, no century had passed since the publication of *Der priziv*, but mere four decades, yet it was long enough to be felt as an unmediated representation of Jewish life already gone by. An anonymous ad in *Ilustrirte vokh* (Illustrated Week) magazine, published a day before the premiere, proclaimed: "It is for the first time that the grandfather of Yiddish theatre will be presented on stage, and Jewish audience will see again folkish characters that have all but disappeared". Here too, *Tsentrāl teater* was hoping to earn cultural capital, and by that financial capital, through the standing of its author. Here too the ad commemorated a *yortsayt*: six years since the author's death (this time an accurate anniversary, rather than a more ambitious and symbolic one, as in the case of *Serkele*).

Even though the *zeyde* (grandfather) was enlisted for the sake of the play's prestige, and obviously to draw an audience, Turkow was attracted to the play for reasons other than its literary and historic pedigree. Unlike *Serkele*, that Turkow found exciting, he considered *Der priziv* too literary and dramatically weak. As far as he was concerned, the cultural treasure at stake was not the play as a whole but rather a *purim-shpil* scene embedded in it. This minor scene, one out of forty-five (!), is what drove Turkow, according to his memoir, to stage the play, or rather, use it as an inspiration for his very free adaptation. Turkow did not only shorten the play substantially, cutting out two whole acts and introducing many changes in the remaining two, he also turned the text into raw material for theatrical experimentation. Humour, buffoonery, meta-theatrical elements were used to challenge theatrical conventions and 'break the fourth wall', namely to eliminate the distance between the stage and the audience and thus undermine realistic-melodramatic model on which the play is based. Turkow drew his inspiration first and foremost from Vsevolod Meyerhold, who rebelled against the realistic tradition of his teachers in Moscow's art theatre, Constantin Stanislavsky



and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. Meyerhold aspired to realize the theatre's theatricality, or what he termed "jeu de théâtre", and for this purpose relied on ideas and methods taken from vaudeville performances, the circus, puppet theatre, fair shows, the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, Japanese Kabuki theatre, Indian Kathakali dance, and so on and so forth (Houghton 1938, 117, 128. Roose-Evans 1984, 21-22). Turkow embraced Meyerhold's theatrical view and sought to fulfil it through the Jewish *purim-shpil*. His vision for *Der priziv* was, in his own words, "to turn the entire play into a theatrical *purim-shpil*" (Turkow 1950, 85). Indeed, the *purim-shpil* scene embedded in *Der priziv* became the centre of the play, not in terms of the plot but of the theatrical language.

The 'discovery' of the *purim-shpil* 'hidden' in *Der priziv* was actually part of a far greater recovery project in which Turkow became involved while probing the archive, and more specifically through the research of his friend Schiper, who during the very weeks *Der priziv* was playing on stage published the first volume of his monumental study *The History of the Jewish Art of Theatre and Drama: From Ancient Times Until 1750* (original title: *Geshichte fun yidisher teater-kunst un drame: fun di eltste tsaytn biz 1750*, 1923). Turkow did not have to wait for the publication of book, as he had already read some of Schiper's work, published in a 1921 special issue of the popular Warsaw Yiddish daily *Moment*. If we were to summarize the most basic claims of Schiper's tome, a work replete with sources, pictures and footnotes, it would be as follows: Jewish theatre did not begin, as is usually maintained, at the last quarter of the nineteenth century, namely with Gorfaden's theatre, but rather with popular theatres in the 'ghettos' of Europe that were active throughout the centuries. Relying on 'a comparative method', meaning the assumption that there were profound cultural connections between Jews and their Christian neighbours, and on the premise of cultural continuity, namely the assumption that later *purim-shpil* performances preserve ancient traditions, Schiper presented a bifurcated system of parallels and influences that run between Jewish jesters and performers (*lets, badkhn, nar, shpilman, purim-shpiler* and others), which he catalogued and dated, and their European counterparts, such as the German Narr, the European Carnival, or the Italian *commedia dell'arte*. Among this wide array of Jewish and non-Jewish performers, one performance stands out as the book's salient protagonist: the *purim-shpil*. The primitive and popular performance, amateurishly played only once a year, the show so wild and vulgar that Rabbis often burned its texts, *Maskilim* and Jews of the post-*Haskala* generation held in contempt, and anti-Semites presented as proof of Jewish cultural inferiority – this lowly performance was transformed in Schiper's account into the cradle of Jewish theatre. Turkow's dramaturgy of *Der priziv* is therefore a complex stage event, seeking to fulfil Meyerhold's theatrical conception, as

well as to promote Schiper's archival discoveries and reinforce his historical assertions. The performance thus signified a bidirectional movement: from the popular repertoire to the archive and back to the stage of Yiddish theatre.

Drawing inspiration from Meyerhold's legendary production of Blok's *Balaganchik* (*The Fairground Booth*, 1906), and from his 1912 article "*Balagan*", Turkow turned to a 'primitive' form of performance in order to create modernist theatre. In his article "*Balagan*" Meyerhold writes about another popular show: the French *cabotine*. The wandering actor, who lacks any artistic vision, and whose name became a synonym for charlatan, was an inspiration for the Russian director. "The *cabotine*", writes Meyerhold, "is related to the Pantomimist, the historian and the actor . . . He created miracles by his technical command. The *cabotine* keeps the tradition of true acting alive" (cited in Roose-Evans 1984, 23). Through the *cabotine* and his accoutrements, the mask, the gesture, the movement, Meyerhold envisioned, the theatre would be able to break free of its literary constraints and experience an improvisational renaissance.<sup>6</sup> Turkow asked, therefore, to execute Meyerhold's vision by creating a clownish, grotesque performance, undermining the audience's expectations, mixing old with new, reality and phantasy, the Western European *commedia dell'arte* and *cabotine* with the traditional Jewish *purim-shpil*.

How did it all appear on stage? Contemporary theatre critics allow us a glimpse into the show, and it seems that Meyerhold's vision was mostly carried out by one character: the *lets* (fool). The show opened with a clown coming from the audience with a hat of bells (partially Arlequin, possibly Pierro, or rather *Stańczyk*, the renown polish clown), albeit wearing a *Tsitsit* (a Jewish religious four-corner garment), the tufts of which showed from under his cloths. This *lets* (*payats*, or *lekerloyfer*, *atsrats*, as he is named in Abramovitch's *purim-shpil* scene) opened with a rhymed comic monolog, where he pointed at the different characters and explained the show, as was the role of the *payats* in the *purim-shpil*. In the traditional folk performance, the *lets'* comic monologue was also a way to address the poor dramatical means, i.e. the lack of a proper stage, set and program, and here too it was combined with a very low-key performance. The Jewish Arlequin included many jokes in his monolog, mentioning among others "Grandpa Mendele" (that is Abramovitch), "Dr. Schiper", Pryłucki, and other renowned theatre critics. He came on stage before each and every set, forming some sort of an intermission, and at times popped also during the scene, to explain what had happened, what happens right now and what is to be expected.

Judging by the harsh criticism the show received, it seems that Turkow's

<sup>6</sup> On Meyerhold's staging of Blok's *Balaganchik* and his seminal 1912 article see Clayton 1993 and Crone 1994.

intention of creating a radical and innovative theatrical event did not come through. Instead of bringing new life into closet drama, the multiple interventions of singing, dancing and comic rhyming only burdened the show. Instead of a playful, carnivalesque theatre, the audience witnessed long speeches that were not that funny. The verbosity of the interludes, or *intermedyes*, as they were called in Yiddish, added to the wordiness of Abramovitch's closet drama, and did away with the playfulness that Turkow had been aiming for. It is doubtful whether Meyerhold, who resented wordiness on stage and preferred pantomime, dance and movement, would have approved of Turkow's interpretation of his work. *Der priziv* had been one of the greatest failures of *Tsentrāl teater*. It failed critically as well as financially. It was performed less than twenty times and went down after less than three weeks. Even Turkow himself admitted that artistically *Der priziv* had been the least successful of *Tsentrāl Theatre's* productions. *Serkele*, on the other hand, he considered its greatest artistic success.

It is not hard to find reasons for *Der priziv's* failure: a play too literary and weak, the audience's difficulty at accepting such an iconoclastic approach towards the "Grandfather of Yiddish Literature" and general resentment of experimentation, an under-equipped stage ("*pust un vist*", empty and deserted, complains the theatre critic of the *Haynt*. Aynhorn 1923, 5), tedious interludes, and the unbreachable gap between the use of basic, 'primitive' elements on the great stage of a Moscow theatre, and on the stage of the already impoverished *Tsentrāl teater*. The most interesting reason for failure, however, had been raised by Yitskhok Turkow-Grudberg, Turkow's brother. According to him the audience did not like the show because they felt that they were its target of mockery. "It was impossible", he writes, "to accept the thought that the *purim-shpil* was the cradle of Jewish theatre" (Turkow-Grudberg 1970, 81). Whatever the reasons for its box-office fiasco, Turkow-Grudberg no doubt grasped the show's underlying ideology. Behind the buffoon's mask, the jokes, the ironic gestures, the stand-up comedy making fun of all greats of Warsaw's Jewish cultural life of the early 1920s, was an extremely serious motivation: rewriting the history of Jewish theatre.

If Turkow-Grudberg is right, then the failure of *Der priziv* was, in a sense, a misunderstanding. While Turkow, following Schiper and Pryłucki, aimed to elevate the *purim-shpil*, turning it into a respectable Jewish art heritage, his unsophisticated audience, still holding to traditional negative view of the *purim-shpil*, took the reference as an insult. While the audience accepted the genesis myth that Turkow performed in *Serkele*, tying it to the *maskilic* closet drama, they were far less willing to accept the theory that the *purim-shpil* was the source of Jewish theatre – perhaps not unlike Darwin's opponents, who refused to accept a theory claiming that human and apes share a common ancestor.

Turkow's determined effort to corroborate and implement Schiper's theses only brings into relief the artificial, non-organic nature of his embracing of the Purim-shpil, rejected so harshly by the audience. Turkow had not drawn his theatrical inspiration from *Purim* celebrations of his childhood in Warsaw, but rather from the archive, where he had also found *Serkele*. In this sense, Turkow's affinity with the *purim-shpil* was not much greater than Meyerhold's with the French *cabotine*. Both searched for a usable past in a cultural realm quite different than the one in which they lived. The production of *Der priziv* demonstrates clearly that modern Jewish theatre had not historically evolved out of the *purim-shpil*, albeit in convoluted ways, as Schiper claimed. Rather, the modern re-imagination of the *purim-shpil* was deeply related to archival research and nationalist ideology and was enabled by huge, daring leaps to the relatively near and yet already foreign Jewish past.

## Conclusion

At this crucial moment of optimism and growth marking the early 1920s, the first years of the Polish Republic, what becomes evident are also the difficulties facing a minority group, living among an often suspicious and hostile environment, who strives to create in its own language, drawing on its own culture. Under such conditions the repertoire and the archive were burdened by desperately pressing questions of national prestige. Jewish artists felt inferior to their European colleagues. Not unlike many of them they strived for historically inspired art, but also, unavoidably, hoped for a modest financial success that would allow their survival. Turkow tried to produce a notion of cultural continuity through *Serkele*, and gained moderate success, despite his effort being possibly awkward and overbearing. However, when he went further, and dared turn to the *purim-shpil*, he failed. The financial and cultural deprivation of his work became evermore striking the more the means he used leaned towards the *avant-garde*. The *purim-shpil* revealed itself as a Freudian *unheimlich*, a collective uncanny, strangely familiar to the twentieth-century Jewish theatregoer, and yet unsettling, perhaps even a taboo, especially for those who wished to view Yiddish theatre as on a par with European theatre. Because it was so difficult to both perform the *purim-shpil* and put it at bay, Turkow tried donning the honourable gown of "Grandpa Mendele" and the more dignified *commedia dell'arte*, yet to no avail. Lacking a more substantial and less daunting theatrical tradition, the making of a *folksteater*, in the sense of a national theatre, was heavily charged and difficult. The intervention of "the archive" in "the repertoire" and "the repertoire" in "the archive" was partially rooted in inferiority feelings and an apologetic

stance, yet, paradoxically, often evoked cultural anxieties among its viewers, rather than calming them. At the same time, however, the bold mixture of past and present, high and low, closet drama and folk performance also demonstrated determination, a willingness to take financial and artistic risks, and most of all – a yearning for a national artform and aesthetic heritage. Turkow's efforts at creating a modernist experimental art theatre out of *maskilic* drama and *purim-shpil* may have not always been commercially or aesthetically successful, but without telling the story of his imaginative and constellative work it would not be possible to understand the historical and artistic origins of Yiddish theatre, and Jewish theatre as a whole..

### Works Cited

- Abramovitsh, Sholem Yankev. 1884. *Der priziv: a drame*. Petersburg: A. Tsederboym.
- Aynhorn, Aren. 1923. "A yontev: Tsu der oyffirung fun "Serkele" in "Tsentral" teater". *Haynt*, September 24.
- Berkowitz, Joel, and Jeremy Dauber. 2006. "Introduction". In *Landmark Yiddish Plays: A Critical Anthology*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Carlson, Marvin. 2003. *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*. Ann Harbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Clayton, Douglas. 1993. *Pierrot in Petrograd: Commedia dell'Arte/ Balagan in Twentieth-Century Russian Theatre and Drama*. Montreal: McGill-Queen University Press.
- Crone, Anna Lisa. 1994. "'Balaganchik,' 'Maskarad' and Poema bez geroia: Meierkhol'dian Expressions of the Artist's Crisis in Twentieth-century Russia". *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 36 (3/4), 317-332.
- Figes, Orlando. 2002. *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*. London: Allen Lane.
- Heftman, Yoysef-Khayim. 1923. "Di noente premyere in "Tsentral" teater". *Der moment*, September 24.
- Houghton, Norris. 1938. *Moscow Rehearsals: an account of methods of production in the Soviet Theatre*. London: G. Allen and Unwin.
- Malinowski, Yerzy. 2017. *Painting and sculpture by Polish Jews in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries (to 1939)*. Translated by Krzysztof Z. Cieszkowski. Warsaw: Tako Publishing House.
- Manger, Itzik. 1936. *Megile Lider*. Warsaw: Aleynenyu.
- Manger, Itzik, Jonas Turkow, and Moyshe Perenson, eds. 1968-1971. *Yidisher teater in eyrope tsvishn beyde welt-milkhomes*. New York: Alveltlekher kultur kongres.
- Prylucky, Noyekh. 1912. *Noyekh prliutskis zambikher far yiddisher folklore, filologye un kulturgeshikhte*, vol. 1. Warsaw: Nayer farlag.
- 1911. *Yidishe Folkslider*. Warsaw: Bikher far ale.
- Roose-Evans, James. 1984. *Experimental Theatre from Stanislavski to Peter Brook*. London: Routledge.

- Schipper, Yitskhok. 1923. *Geshichte fun yidisher teater-kunst un drame: fun di eltste tsaytn biz 1750*. Warsaw: Kultur-lige.
- Schudt, Johann Jakob. 1714-1718. *Jüdische Merkwürdigkeiten*, 4 vols. Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: S.T. Hocker.
- Shatzky, Yankev. 1935. "Teater: geshikhte fun yidishn teater". *Algemeyne entsiklopedye, Yidn*, 12 vols, vol. 2, 389-414. Paris: Dubnov fond.
- Shinar, Mordkhe. 1968-1971. "Varshever yidisher kunst-teater". *Yidsiher teater in ey-rope tsvishn beyde velt-milkhomes*, 53-72.
- Stern, Zehavit. 2011. "From Jester to Gesture: East-European Jewish Culture and the Re-imagination of Folk Performance". PhD diss., University of California. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/157777n1#main> (Accessed 31 August 2020).
- Taylor, Diana. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- (Der) Tunkeler (Yoysef Tunkle). 1990. *Sefer ha-humoreskot ve-haprodyot ha-sifrutiyot be-yidish*. Edited by Yekhiel Sheyntukh. Jerusalem: Magnes.
- Turkow, Zygmunt. 1961. *Di ibergerisene tkufe: Fragmentn fun mayn lebn*. Buenos Aires: Tsentral farband fun poylishe yidn in argenitine.
- 1950. *Shmuesn vegn teater*. Buenos Aires: Unser bukh.
- Turkow-Grudberg, Yitskhok. 1970. *Zygmunt Turkow*. Tel Aviv: Orly.
- 1968-1971. "Ydische teaters in poyln". *Yidische teaters in poyln tsvishn beyde welt-milkhomes*, 73-126.
- 1951. *Yidische teater in poyln*. Warsaw: Yidish Bukh.
- Weiser, Kalman (Keith). 2011. *Jewish People, Jewish Nation: Noah Prylucki and the Folkists in Poland*. Toronto: University of Toronto.
- Zeitlin, Aren. 1923. "Etinger af der bine: Serkele". *Der moment*, September 28.
- Zer-Zion, Shelly. 2017. "Ester Rokhl Kaminska and the Legitimization of Yiddish Theatre". *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 16 (3): 465-480.





YAIR LIPSHITZ\*

## Nocturnal Histories: Nighttime and the Jewish Temporal Imagination in Modern Hebrew Drama

Abstract

The paper examines the utilization of night as dramatic time in modern Hebrew plays as a device to explore the meaning of Jewish history. A long Jewish religious tradition links nighttime to questions of exile and redemption and constructs it, through texts and ritual performance, as a time to reflect upon time. Modern Hebrew theatre, although often considered a secular enterprise, follows this tradition either through direct allusions or more implicitly, while also critiquing or deconstructing its premises. The plays analyzed here, ranging from the 1930s to the 2010s and varying in political stance, stage nocturnal debates regarding the meaning of time and history, but also participate in broader such debates within Israeli society. Most prominent in these plays is the tension between religiosity and secularity in the understanding of time, as they interrogate the complex relations between Zionism and traditional concepts of redemption. As such, Hebrew and Israeli theatre takes part in shaping the temporal imagination of its surrounding culture and investigating its theological undercurrents and political ramifications. The paper suggests reconsidering Israeli theatre's relation to Jewish religious performative traditions, as the case-study of nighttime exemplifies.

KEYWORDS: Israeli theatre; theatre and time; theatre and history; theatre and ritual; *On This Night*; *Tashmad*; *Tikkun khatsot*; *Night of the Twentieth*

In her book *Theatre & History*, Rebecca Schneider observes that “theatre, like history, is an art of time. Even, we could say, *the art of time*” (Schneider 2014, 7). Theatre takes time – the couple of hours through which the performance unfolds – but it also condenses time, molds it into a temporal experience, and often presents other fictional times to its audience. Indeed, scholarship in recent years has been particularly attuned to the multilayered ways in which theatre shapes temporalities, and especially how it addresses and stages history.<sup>1</sup> As such, theatre participates in the temporal imagination of the culture

<sup>1</sup> Prominent contributions regarding theatre and time include Limon 2010 and 2015; and Wiles 2014, while Rokem 2000 alongside Schneider 2011 and 2014 all address performances of history.

\* Tel Aviv University - yairlip@tauex.tau.ac.il

in which it takes place – that is, in the various ways in which a given society understands time; its shape and movement; the interconnections between pasts, presents and futures; and the events that society wishes to remember and to forget. Theatre contributes to the charting of what sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel (2003) calls the “time-maps” of society, and at times undermines or challenges such maps.

In this paper, I would like to consider how Hebrew (and later Israeli<sup>2</sup>) theatre in the twentieth and early twenty first centuries achieved this through the prevalent usage of nighttime as dramatic time<sup>3</sup> in many of its plots. By reviewing several key plays, I will argue that they continue a longer Jewish tradition that links night to broad questions regarding history. As dramatic time, night functions in these plays as a mechanism to address a larger time – Jewish history. This interplay between the “small time” of night and the “large time” of history is charged by Jewish rituals and myths, and is reemployed in the theatre. It is possible that in many cases the dramatic time of night is also echoed in the stage time of actual performance which, in modern theatre, is often conducted in the evening and in darkened auditoriums.

Such theatrical reactivations of a Jewish tradition, which as we will soon see has always been both textual and performative, allow us to reconsider the broader question of Hebrew theatre’s relation to the Jewish religious legacy. Israeli theatre is often presented as a prominently secular endeavor, and one that could have only stemmed from the secularization of Jewish society in modern times (see for example Rozik 2013). Furthermore, due to the relative dearth of theatrical activity in Jewish societies prior to modernity, it is also presented as lacking dramatic, theatrical and performative traditions of its own (see, for example, Yaari 2018, 3-8). There is no debate that Jewish religion continues to concern Hebrew and Israeli theatre thematically throughout its existence (Levy 1998; Abramson 1998, 118-45). However, when it comes to the performative mechanisms of Jewish religion and of Hebrew theatre, scholarship often frames the relations between the two mainly in terms of the breach marked by secularization. While the importance of this breach should not be underestimated, the utilization of nighttime in

<sup>2</sup> “Hebrew theatre/drama” will be used here to relate to drama written and performed in Hebrew mainly in Palestine from the late nineteenth century until the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, while “Israeli theatre/drama” will refer to its continuation after that. Throughout the paper, I will use “Israel” to refer to the State of Israel, and “Palestine” to relate to the territory prior to 1948 (“Palestinian”, however, will also refer to the Arab population of Palestine). The term “The Land of Israel” will refer to the Jewish conception of the same territory across the ages.

<sup>3</sup> In “dramatic time”, I refer to the fictional time in which the events represented on-stage take place, as opposed to “stage time”, the concrete duration of an actual theatrical performance (see Pavis 1998, 409-12).

Hebrew drama can serve as a case-study that illuminates a more complex picture, in which Israeli theatre continues Jewish religious performative traditions even as it critiques and transforms them. The plays discussed below grapple with religious and secular interpretations of Jewish history from a contemporary perspective, but they also participate, as theatrical events, in a longer performative practice of considering history at night. It is therefore not only the *theme* of these plays that addresses the entanglements of religiosity, secularity, and time – but also their apparatus that participates in the very same entanglements.

### **A Time to Consider Time: Jewish History through Nightly Imagery and Practices**

In order to further explore these dynamics, one needs to take into account modern Hebrew drama's profound connection to the project of Jewish national revival known as Zionism. While not all the plays reviewed here necessarily take a Zionist stance, and even those who do might disagree about what such stance might entail, it is important to note that the original emergence of Hebrew theatre went hand in hand with the Zionist project, as part of a construction of a modern Hebrew national culture (see Rokem 1996). Zionism itself, as Eyal Chowers (2012, 72-114) shows in detail, was deeply concerned with questions of temporality and history. It had to posit itself vis-à-vis the Jewish past, and even more so against traditional Jewish notions of time and history, in order to articulate the meaning of its own moment in time.

Three terms that frame the traditional Jewish understanding of history will serve as key to our discussion: destruction, exile, and redemption. The *destruction* referred to here is of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70 CE. In the traditional Jewish narrative, *exile* ensued from this destruction as the Jewish population of Judaea dispersed among the nations.<sup>4</sup> According to religious Jewish faith, at least in its more conservative forms, Jews are to remain in this state until the future divine *redemption*, through the arrival of the Messiah who will lead the Jews back to the Land of Israel. In other words, while destruction was an event in the past, and with redemption relegated to the future, exile was considered to be the state of affairs in the present.

While there were other exiles of the Jews from the Land of Israel prior to the destruction of the Second Temple (such as the exile to Egypt depicted at the end of the book of Genesis and the exile to Babylonia following the

<sup>4</sup> In reality, the situation was far more complex, as many Jews were living in Diaspora even prior to the destruction of the Second Temple.

destruction of the First Temple), this exile became the paradigm for Jewish self-understanding and a cornerstone for their temporal imagination. As a term, “exile” (*galut*) came to encompass more than territorial displacement. First and foremost, it also connoted political subjugation, even for Jews who remained on their land (Milikowsky 1997). Furthermore, according to Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin (2013), exile also gradually referred to a cosmic state: the world itself was in exile while Jews were in exile, and so was the divine presence (*shekhinah*) itself.

However, as Raz-Krakotzkin further demonstrates, in the modern period, and especially in Zionist thought, this paradigm gave way to another in which the Jews were exiled *from* the world, rather than the world being in exile *with* the Jews. This image’s theological roots, according to Raz-Krakotzkin, are in the Christian understanding of Jewish exile, and it foregrounds a notion that, in their state of exile, the Jews were banished from (or at least to the margins of) world history. Jews in exile also lived “outside history”. Consequently, Zionism aimed at returning the Jews not only to the Land of Israel and to political sovereignty, but also back to history. In this sense, the destruction brought about a crisis in time inasmuch as in space, and exile was a temporal as well as geographical disjointedness – one that Zionism sought to put an end to. In its desire to bring an end to exile, Zionism also came close to the orbit of Jewish messianism. Indeed, the question whether Zionism was a messianic movement in secular garb was hotly debated between the defenders and detractors of Zionism as well as within scholarship (Ohana 2010). Through its complex relations with Jewish messianism, Zionism functioned as an intervention in the modern Jewish experience of time.

Due to this context, Hebrew theatre’s own engagements with time became an extremely vital endeavor. Theatre as a temporal art-form participated, whether affirmingly or critically, in a broader national project of reshaping the Jewish temporal imagination. Whatever stance the plays discussed below take regarding Zionism, they were all created during a century in which the Jewish temporal imagination was in flux – and they took part in it through images of night.

The connections between night and Jewish history can be traced back to several key biblical images that link redemption with the break of dawn. Isaiah promises Israel that if they will act justly their light shall “burst through like the dawn” (Isaiah 58:8) and begins one of his prophecies of consolation with the words: “Arise, shine, for your light has dawned; The Presence of the Lord has shone upon you” (Isaiah 60:1). The imagery of a future dawn clearly implies that the current moment is nightlike. In Late Antiquity, Rabbinic exegeses on various biblical verses continued to elaborate this imagery. For example, the midrash reads the words in Song of Songs 3:1 – “On my bed at night, I sought him whom my soul loves” – in an allegorical manner, in which

the beloved people of Israel seek out God in times of exile, with nighttime serving as a direct symbol of the various subjugations in Jewish history.<sup>5</sup> In other places, dawn is similarly presented as an explicit analogy for redemption, as is the case in the following story from the Talmud Yerushalmi (also known as the Palestinian Talmud, assumed to be compiled around 400 CE):

רבי חייא רבא ורבי שמעון בן חלפתא הוו מהלכין בהדא בקעת ארבל בקריצתה וראו איילת  
השחר שבקע אורה. אמר רבי חייא רבה לר' שמעון בן חלפתא בי רבי כך היא גאולתן של  
ישראל בתחילה קימאה קימאה כל מה שהיא הולכת היא רבה והולכת.

[Rabbi Khiyya the Great and Rabbi Shimon ben Khalafta were walking together in the Arbel Valley in the early hours of the morning, and they saw the very first rays of dawn. Said Rabbi Khiyya the Great to Rabbi Shimon ben Khalafta: “Rabbi, such is Israel’s redemption: at first it appears little by little, and the longer it continues the brighter it shines”.]<sup>6</sup>

In such rabbinic texts, the temporal frame of the daily cycle, with dawn succeeding night, becomes the model for a longer time: that of Jewish history in its entirety.

Night, however, is not just a time that metaphorically resembles another time – the time of exile – but also a time in which such times can be reflected upon. In the Talmud Bavli (also known as the Babylonian Talmud, assumed to be compiled around 600 CE), God is described as sitting at night and lamenting the exile of his people:

ר' אליעזר אומר שלש משמרות הוי הלילה ועל כל משמר ומשמר יושב הקדוש ברוך הוא  
ושואג כארי [...] וסימן לדבר משמרה ראשונה חמור נוער שניה כלבים צועקים שלישי  
תינוק יונק משדי אמו ואשה מספרת עם בעלה. [...] אמר רב יצחק בר שמואל משמיה דרב  
ג' משמרות הוי הלילה ועל כל משמר ומשמר יושב הקדוש ברוך הוא ושואג כארי ואומר אוי  
לבנים שבעונותיהם החרבתי את ביתי ושרפתי את היכלי והגליתים לבין אומות העולם:

[Rabbi Eliezer says: there are three watches during the night, and on each and every watch the Holy One, Blessed be He, sits and roars like a lion . . . And a sign for this is: on the first watch – the donkey brays; on the second watch – the dogs bark; and on the third watch – an infant suckles on his mother’s breasts, and a woman converses with her husband. . . . Rabbi Isaac son of Shmuel said in the name of Rav: there are three watches during the night, and on each and every watch the Holy One, Blessed be He, sits and roars like a lion and says: “Woe to the children, that due to their sins I destroyed my house, burned my Temple and exiled them among the nations of the world”.]<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah 3:1.

<sup>6</sup> Talmud Yerushalmi, tractate *Berachot* 1:1 (my translation).

<sup>7</sup> Talmud Bavli, tractate *Berachot* 3a (my translation).

This passage begins with depicting nocturnal voices: both concrete physical voices that can be heard during the night and God's unheard roar, later elaborated to be a lament over the exile of his children. It seems that the Talmud hints at a connection between these voices, as if one could recall exile through the auditory experience of nighttime. Night here is not just a symbolic image of exile but also a concrete time with actual voices, in which God remembers exile and experiences its pain (and the text possibly prompts those reading it to do so as well).

This double role has been further expanded through Jewish ritual praxis. Most influentially, kabbalists in sixteenth century Safed developed an intricate nocturnal ritual deeply related to questions of exile and redemption. This ritual is known as *tikkun khatsot*, the midnight *tikkun* (a charged term in kabbalistic parlance, which generally means mending, healing, or repairing a broken cosmos). *Tikkun khatsot* is an ordered ceremony of prayers and Psalms recital, and it employed a clearly messianic tone (Scholem 1969, 146-50; Magid 1996). The ritual is composed of two parts: *Tikkun Rachel*, which includes lamentations over the exile, and *Tikkun Leah*, which relates to consolation and messianic redemption. *Tikkun khatsot* is therefore a nocturnal ritual that directly touches upon issues of Jewish history. Nighttime emerges through ritual performance as a time in which one considers time.

As opposed to these religious ritual performances, modern Hebrew theatre has been all in all mostly a secular enterprise (Urian 2000). However, I wish to argue here that it also offered a performative practice through which night became once again a time for considering time. Hebrew drama returns time and again to the night in order to debate questions regarding history, exile, and redemption. In this sense, it offers theatre as a shared space of nocturnal practice for thinking time, following a longer Jewish tradition. Simultaneously, it enables a critique or reevaluation of the very same notions that serve as the basis of the Jewish temporal imagination.

### **Destruction as Nightmare: *On This Night***

My first case study is one of the earliest original Hebrew plays to be performed in Palestine, Nathan Bistrizky's *On This Night* (first performed in a shortened version by Habimah in 1936). The play is an adaptation of a legend that appears in multiple sources throughout rabbinic literature, detailing events supposedly leading to the destruction of the Temple.<sup>8</sup> The tale

<sup>8</sup> Since there is no historical evidence that this story actually occurred, I will therefore consider it an historical legend which nevertheless had deep impact on Jewish self-understanding for ages. On the tale itself, with its many versions, see: Tropper 2005.

depicts how Yohanan ben Zakkai, the leader of the Rabbis, fled the besieged Jerusalem smuggled inside a coffin and struck a deal with the captain of the Roman army. Ben Zakkai asked to receive the intellectual center of Yavneh while surrendering Jerusalem, prioritizing cultural-religious continuity over political sovereignty. Despite several possible reservations, the rabbinic story in its various versions all in all portrays ben Zakkai favorably, as a hero who enabled the continuance of Jewish religion and scholastic culture. However, during the twentieth century, and especially with the rise of Zionism, it became a challenging story, as it undermined notions of national military self-defense in favour as what might seem as defeatist pandering to imperial forces. Zionism at its inception was mainly a secular movement, and perceived itself as a break from traditional religious Jewish existence in the diaspora. Seen in this light, ben Zakkai might be portrayed as a dangerously pro-diasporic defector, who set in motion (or at least was complicit in) the start of Jewish exile – the very same exile that Zionism was set to put an end to (Boyarin 1997; Marx 2010).

Clearly, by choosing such a pivotal moment in Jewish history and dramatizing it during another pivotal moment, the ascent of Zionism, *On This Night* is very much concerned with questions regarding the Jewish past and its relation to the present. Given the complexities of this story's reception in modern Hebrew culture, Bistrizky's treatment of it is remarkably nuanced and balanced, presenting the case and the pitfalls for both sides of an ideological debate. The play constructs the Talmudic story as a conflict between two sects within Jerusalem: on the one hand, ben Zakkai and his students, who are inclined towards spirituality, scholarship, and various degrees of detachment from the earthly and the political; on the other, the militant zealots who are determined to defend Jerusalem's political independence, even at the risk of destroying their own people and at times turning violently against them. Each camp includes stereotypical characters who accentuate the weaknesses of their respective position, alongside more rounded characters that foreground their dilemmas and genuine motivations. As opposed to the original story, the play offers an open end, with ben Zakkai leaving Jerusalem inside the coffin – but without seeing him actually arriving to the Roman military camp and striking the deal.

The night in the play's title refers to the one preceding the final scene, during which ben Zakkai decides to leave Jerusalem for good. Bistrizky explicitly joins the long symbolic tradition that equates nighttime with exile when he has ben Zakkai state: "when this night will end for ben Zakkai, immediately the night for Israel will begin, a night that I do not know its measure and cannot guess its end" (Bistrizky 1935, 149).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Translations from all plays are my own.



The peak of the play is a lengthy dream sequence that has no roots in the rabbinic source material and was omitted from the shortened 1936 version. Ben Zakkai, after falling asleep inside the coffin while still at home inside the besieged Jerusalem, dreams about the consequences of his future actions. He walks in the alleys of Jerusalem after it had been destroyed by the Romans, facing the effects of destruction and exile on the city and on the Jews, who become a diasporic, rootless, shapeless people. In one remarkable moment, ben Zakkai encounters several Jewish students of the Talmud who read the story *about* him and dispute his motivations:

לומד אחד: מדוע וותרו חכמינו על ירושלים, לא כדי להשליך הקליפה ולשמור על התוך למה החליף ר' יוחנן בן-זכאי –  
 ר' יוחנן בן-זכאי: (קופץ ונכנס בין המתווכחים ומניע בשפתיו בחזקה, כאילו הוא צורח באזניהם, ואילו קולו אינו נשמע כלל והללו אינם נותנים דעתם עליו כל-עיקר.)  
 לומד אחד: נר ישראל, עמוד הימני, הפטיש החזק, זיו החכמה, למה, אומר אני, החליף הוא את ירושלים בכרם שביבנה? משום שבקש להשליך הקליפה ולשמור על התוך...  
 ר' יוחנן בן-זכאי: (הוא נותן להם סימנים נמרצים ונרגשים בידיו, כמבקש למשוך לבם אליו, והם אינם שמים על לב, כאילו אינם רואים אותו כלל.)

[ONE STUDENT. Why did our Sages forsake Jerusalem if not to throw away the exterior peel and keep the interior? Why did Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai swap – BEN ZAKKAI. (*Jumps in between the debaters, moving his lips forcefully, as if he is shouting into their ears and his voice is not heard at all. They do not notice him whatsoever.*)

ONE STUDENT. The Lamp of Israel, the Right-Hand Pillar, the Mighty Hammer, the Radiance of Wisdom<sup>10</sup>, why, say I, did he swap Jerusalem with the vineyard of Yavneh? Because he wished to throw away the exterior and keep the interior . . .

BEN ZAKKAI. (*He gestures vigorously and emotionally at them with his hands, trying to catch their attention, but they do not notice, as if they do not see him at all.*)

(119-20)

This dreamlike moment allows for an elaborate time-travel: a character from the Jewish (pseudo-)historical past confronts the future implications of his actions on the entire people and the way his decisions are to be interpreted by generations to come. Through such nocturnal time-travel, Bistrizky constructs a multi-layered temporality that serves as a prism for the investigation of both the past and the present. It straightforwardly confronts the rabbinic story's role as a legacy that shaped future Jewish understandings of history.

<sup>10</sup> All these are epithets associated with Yohanan ben Zakkai in rabbinic literature.

As the dream sequence progresses, ben Zakkai (or an elderly man who is his double) engages in a lengthy debate with a young man who sides with the zealot rebels in Jerusalem and puts forth a clearly proto-Zionist worldview that celebrates political sovereignty, armed action, and physical territory – all contrasted with ben Zakkai’s diasporic stress on a spiritual-intellectual Jewish existence. The young man demands to put an end to destruction, to cure the Jews from their exilic addiction to their state of ruin, and offer them a rebuilt homeland instead. He speaks of himself as a representative of a generation “who is not afraid of profaning the sacred, because it sanctifies the profane” (130). As opposed to him, the elderly man speaks with religious awe about the exalted mystery of the ruined Jerusalem, as a space in which “every voice . . . is like a moaning echo of the Divine Presence (*shekhinah*) who is in exile” (128). The moaning of the *shekhinah* in exile during this nightly scene evokes the nocturnal laments of God about the destruction described in the Talmudic passage quoted above. The old man cherishes the destructed space in which such divine laments can be heard, and dreads the moment when these voices will be subdued by rebuilding Jerusalem. Indeed, for him, the end of exile and the reconstruction of a homeland come with a steep spiritual price:

ואילו מכיון שירושלים נבנית, מיד ירושלים נשכחת. כל זמן שהוטל על בן-אדם לזכור, הרי לבו ער תמיד ונפשו דולקת כנר-תמיד. ניטל ממנו הכרח הזכרון, מיד אש נפשו שוקעת כנר זה שנפטר. (מקונן והולך) וי לי, בשביל הכל אני רואה מקום בירושלים הבנויה, רק לא בשבילה! רק לא בשביל זו, שהיתה מטלטלת ירושלים החרבה בחיקה, כאם זו את יונקה החולה... רק לא בשביל השכינה! רק לא בשביל השכינה! (גועה בבכיה) בני, בכו לגורל השכינה בירושלים הבנויה! בכו, שאין מקום לשכינה בירושלים הבנויה!

[Once Jerusalem is built, immediately Jerusalem is forgotten. As long as one is tasked to remember, one’s heart is always awake and one’s soul burns like an eternal candle. Take from one the necessity to remember, and immediately his soul’s fire is extinguished like a dying candle. (*laments*) Woe is me, for I see a place for everything in the built Jerusalem, except for Her! Except for She, that carried the ruined Jerusalem in Her bosom, like this mother who carries her sick infant . . . Except for the *shekhinah*!<sup>11</sup> Except for the *shekhinah*! (*wails in tears*) My children, cry about the fate of the *shekhinah* in the built Jerusalem! Cry, for there is no place for the *shekhinah* in the built Jerusalem! (129-30)]

The old man’s stance can be read in a twofold manner. It can be a Zionist critique from the playwright’s part about how religious diasporic Judaism grew to find spiritual meaning only in the current state of destruction, and

<sup>11</sup> As Jewish tradition evolved, the *shekhinah* became a more distinctly feminine entity, at times representing the female aspect of the divine.

is therefore resistant to any welcome change towards national sovereignty. This is definitely in line with several caricatures of traditional Judaism in the dream sequence and throughout the play. At the same time, however, it can be also be read and performed as a genuine concern regarding the potential spiritual risks entailed in modern secular nationalism, and an insight into the ways in which exile shaped Jewish sensitivities in ways that are not merely negative.

*On This Night*, then, utilizes the nightly scene in order to probe into the shift from traditional religious Jewish existence in exile to the emergence of secular nationalism in modernity, by returning to an event in the past that sketches a move in the opposite direction: from sovereignty to exile. While the original rabbinic story about ben Zakkai's departure from Jerusalem does not put any particular emphasis on nighttime, Bistrizky's adaptation clearly uses night as a dramatic time in which the deep questions of Jewish history can and should be addressed. By subtly evoking other rabbinic sources that connect nighttime to exile, through the lamentations of the *shekhnah*, the particular night at the play's center becomes a liminal time situated between sovereignty and exile, serving as a mirror image to another liminal time: that of early Zionism.

Intriguingly, in the play's final scene, once ben Zakkai has been smuggled out of Jerusalem through the city gate, Bistrizky adds another moment that does not appear in the original story. The leader of the zealots (and ben Zakkai's nephew) calls his compatriots to join him in a suicide mission and burn down the Roman camp – thus possibly undoing ben Zakkai's endeavors and changing the course of history (180-1). The play ends at the break of dawn. The audience does not get to know which side had succeeded in its efforts, and the gatekeeper of the city orders ben Zakkai's daughter to go away, to which she responds with a question that is the final words of the play: "Where to?" (184). Situated at the threshold of Jerusalem, it is unclear whether the daughter should (and can) go back into the city, or outside to exile. With its ambiguous and open ending, *On This Night* does not present exile as a sealed historical fact, but rather as a malleable option that can still be changed and perhaps is changing in the present, through Zionism's own temporal intervention.

### **Night between Destruction and Redemption: *Tashmad* and *Tikkun khatsot***

While Bistrizky's play pitted old, traditional, diasporic religion against new, young, secular Zionism, as the twentieth century progressed, a religious strand of Zionism emerged as an influential force in Israeli politics and soci-

ety. This became most prominent after the 1967 war and the Israeli conquest of the Temple Mount, East Jerusalem, and the Palestinian territories of Judea and Samaria, which were under Jordanian rule at the time. The victory of 1967 and the renewed access to holy Jewish sites were considered almost miraculous by many Israelis. Religious Zionist circles further developed the ideas of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hacoen Kook (1865-1935) and his son Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook (1891-1982), according to which the Zionist movement, even though originally mainly a secular one, was in fact part of a divine plan of messianic redemption. In the 1970s, the religious-Zionist *Gush Emunim* movement began settling in the Occupied Territories, as part of a right-wing vision of a whole, Jewish, Land of Israel and a denial of a potential Palestinian statehood (Ravitzky 1996). The messianic undertones of this strand of Zionism alarmed many in the left-wing of Israeli society, and the religious Zionist interpretation of Jewish history and of the current moment became the focus of attention of the left-leaning secular theatre of the 1980s, in plays such as Joshua Sobol's *Jerusalem Syndrome* (1987) and Motti Lerner's *Pangs of the Messiah* (also 1987).

Shmuel Hasfari's *Tashmad*, first performed in 1982 at the Acco Festival for Alternative Theatre, is a relatively early example of this trend. The name of the play refers to the Jewish year 5744, roughly corresponding to September 1983-September 1984<sup>12</sup>, as it is traditionally written in Hebrew letters according to their numerical value. However, since such a spelling of the year includes the Hebrew word *shmad*, which means destruction or annihilation, some traditional and religious Jews at the time considered it a bad omen and re-sequenced the letters in order to form *Tashdam* or *Shadmat*. Hasfari's use of the name *Tashmad* is therefore ominous, and directs the audience already in the play's title to questions of history and the potential metaphysical meaning of time.

The play takes place during the night of Tisha B'Av – the ninth of the Hebrew month of Av, in which according to tradition both the First and Second Temple were destroyed. Consequently, Tisha B'Av is a major fasting day in the Jewish calendar, devoted to lamentations and self-afflictions. According to Jewish tradition, however, Tisha B'Av is also the time in which the Messiah was born, so that the seed of future redemption is already present in past destructions. Hasfari's play utilizes this charged time in order to probe into contemporary theological-political conflicts within Israeli society.

The play's plot centers around a group of right-wing ideologues who entrench themselves in an underground bunker in one of the settlements in Samaria, in order to resist the evacuation plans of the Israeli government. The

<sup>12</sup> Jewish years are counted from the Creation of the World, as depicted in the book of Genesis.

group consists of four adults – representing various groups in Jewish-Israeli society, from the entirely secular to the fanatically religious – and a baby. During the course of the night, one of the inhabitants of the bunker, Jacob, experiences a manic episode in which he is convinced that he is the Messiah, and manages to sway the others along with him. The messianic ecstasy culminates with the murder of one of the members and a possible joint suicide of the rest of the group.<sup>13</sup> *Tashmad* is clearly an apocalyptic warning against the latent violence in the messianic strands of right-wing (mainly religious) Zionism.

*Tashmad*'s dialogue with Jewish temporal traditions is not restricted to the play's name and the connotations of Tisha B'Av as a time of both destruction and messianic redemption, but is maintained also with those of nighttime. This begins with one of the character's demand that the media will come to interview them at midnight, followed by his statement that it is the group's duty to mend the state of exile (Hasfari 1982, 23-4). The Hebrew word used for "mending" here is from the same root of *tikkun*, and taken together with the demand of the press to arrive at midnight (*khatso*), both words evoke *tikkun khatso* with its occupation with questions of exile and redemption.

Indeed, much of the play's dialogue is devoted to the interpretation of Jewish history and of Zionism in messianic terms. Alma, a religious Zionist young woman, explains to the secular Leibo that Zionism is "the beginning of redemption", an important stage in God's ever-progressing plan, as detailed in the Bible (25). According to this view, even though Zionism was promoted by mainly secular Jews, it in fact fully realized a religious program in which secular Zionists are but a phase (26). Another character, Nachman, maintains that the secular Zionists are "Messiah, son of Joseph", an early messianic figure who according to tradition is destined to die but paves the way to the ultimate Messiah, son of David. It is religious Zionism that takes the role of the latter, ultimate, Messiah (28).

The nightly interpretation of time takes a more theatrical manifestation as the play progresses, when characters do not only discuss the Messiah and redemption, but actually aim at embodying them. This begins with an overtly theatrical performance that Alma devises for the media once the press arrives to cover their protest:

<sup>13</sup> As Zahava Caspi (2013, 143) notes, the first production of the play concluded with an open ending as to whether the group blew itself up or not. However, by the time the play was revived in 2005, the catastrophic conclusion was clear: the play ended with a huge explosion.

רגע, אני יודעת, חשבתי על מה שנגיד. [...] חכו – נעשה כמו הצגה. בבת אחת יראו את זה. הנה, אני אעמוד כאן ואדבר, לא בטוחה בדיוק על מה. כן, על זה שהגאולה באה וכל זה כי אני אישה, לא בדיוק אישה, בחורה, אני עלמה, עלמה. זהו, כמו השכינה. ואני אגיד את כל העניין הזה עם הגאולה שמבצבצת ובאה כמו אור השחר והשכינה קמה מעפרה. ככה אני אקום עם פנים יפות ועצובות. אתם תעמדו כאן ותסתכלו עלי כאילו לא מאמינים.

[Wait a minute, I know, I thought what we would say . . . Wait, we'll make a show. They will see it at once. Here, I will stand here and talk, not sure exactly about what. Yes, about redemption arriving and all that, because I am a woman, not exactly a woman, a girl, I am a maiden (*alma*), a maiden. Exactly, like the *shekhinah*. I will speak this whole thing about redemption gradually emerging like the light of dawn, and the *shekhinah* arising from the dust. I will arise like that, with a sad and pretty face. You will stand here and look at me as if you cannot believe. (37)]

In her role as the feminine *shekhinah*, Alma will perform her redemption as the break of dawn, echoing the image cited above from the Talmud Yerushalmi. However, in the remaining paragraph, not quoted here, Alma continues to stage a rape scene of the *shekhinah* to represent the State's assault on the process of messianic redemption through the attempted evacuation, in order to dissuade the authorities from proceeding with it. This meta-theatrical moment is planned as a performance of dawn that is to take place at midnight: an embodiment of the anticipated redemption at the midst of exile, at the brink of a possible another destruction.

An even more radical embodiment in the play is that of Jacob, once he believes himself to be the Messiah. For him, this is not a theatrical performance, but the real thing. His understanding of time is that redemption is indeed not a future event but actually takes place in the present:

עכשיו לשמוח, להגיד ברוך השם. נגמר אלפיים שנה, נגמרה הגלות היום. תשעה באב ואין אבל מעכשיו. זה שנת תשמ"ד – במקום להשמיד אותנו – אנחנו השמדנו אותו. זה בדיוק השנה בדיוק הרגע – צריך לעשות מעשה.

[And now be happy, praise the Lord, the two millennia of exile are over today. It is Tisha B'Av and there is no mourning from now on. This is the year *tashmad* – instead of destroying us, we destroyed it. This is precisely the second, precisely the moment, it is time to do a deed. (46)]

Jacob's words seek to reinterpret time: he reframes the meaning of the day in the Jewish calendar (Tisha B'Av) as well as of the year itself (*tashmad*). Beyond that, he aims at reframing the present: "the two millennia of exile are over today . . . This is precisely the second, precisely the moment". It is the present-time of the nightly drama that become laden with the task "to do a deed" rather than wait for redemption to come.



Jacob's image of the Messiah that he should become is deeply nihilistic, power-crazed, anti-moral and ruthlessly violent, as a "kind of Satan" that burns everything after God had forsaken the Jews (49). Jacob indeed proceeds to facilitate the murder of Nachman, the religious Jew who is most uneasy with the night's events. Indeed, Jacob's messianic vision goes not only against basic humanistic values, but even against traditional Jewish religion, by claiming that Jewish religious law is annulled and that all that was prohibited is now permitted (40).<sup>14</sup> At the play's climax, Jacob burns the Talmud and forces Nachman to worship the rifle rather than the book, hailing a new era in which Jews revere power instead of knowledge (45-7). Note that the bookish, intellectual Jewish culture that in Bistrizky's play was associated with traditional religion is here annihilated not by secularism but by a new brand of nationalistic religiosity. The play's violent ending serves as a somber warning of the dangerous messianic undercurrents of religious Zionism, and an outcry against its interpretation of time.

Written several decades later and from the exact opposite pole of the political spectrum, Amichai Hazan and Oshri Maimon's *Tikkun khatsot*<sup>15</sup>, which directly alludes in its name to the nocturnal kabbalistic ritual, curiously dramatizes a situation rather similar to *Tashmad*'s. The play, depicting a dramatic night in one of the Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories, was first performed by a theatre group of Jewish Orthodox male actors in the 2017 Acco Festival for Alternative Theatre. The play and the group are part of a broader process in Israel in recent years, in which Jewish Orthodox people engage in theatre and the performing arts, after decades of mutual detachment. However, in the circumstances of its production, *Tikkun khatsot* happened to participate in another shift within Israeli cultural politics. Premiering exactly thirty five years after *Tashmad* had, in the very same festival, *Tikkun khatsot* exemplifies the profound changes that took place during these years in Israeli society. While the festival has long been an important mainstay in the Israeli theatre scene (Shem-Tov 2016), during that year it became a battleground within the wider culture wars that raged in the country. Following the lead of then-Minister of Culture, the right-wing Miri Regev, the festival's steering committee decided to reject a play about Pales-

<sup>14</sup> This in itself is not foreign to the history of Jewish messianism which, as Scholem (1971, 19-24, 78-141) observed, often contained an antinomian strand which called for the suspension, annulment or subversion of Jewish religious law. Hasfari utilizes this strand in order to startlingly portray religious Zionism as a lethal enemy to traditional religiosity.

<sup>15</sup> Not to be confused with another Israeli play by the same name, written by Amnon Levy and Rami Danon, that was very successful when first staged in 1996. That play does not deal directly with questions of Jewish history, but rather with the place of Mizrahi Jews in contemporary Israeli society.



tinian prisoners from participating, leading to the resignation of the artistic director and the withdrawal of all other artists from the festival (see Ashkenazi 2017). A new artistic director was required to quickly establish another program, and with many left-wing artists refusing to take part in the festival as protest, the final program included several works by right-wing or settler theatre artists. For some, this was understood as pandering to the Minister and the regime. For others, it was a sign of a welcome diversification of the festival, which was hitherto often seen as predominantly leftist, elitist, and Tel-Avivian (on this longstanding view of the festival, see Shem-Tov 2016, 153-6). This way or that, in terms of the theatrical event, the premiere of *Tikkun khatsot* was part and parcel of a greater struggle within Israeli society over cultural hegemony. As we will see, it also offers an alternative view on history and time, from a religious right-wing perspective.

Like Hasfari's play, *Tikkun khatsot* also portrays a nightly scene in which right-wing ideologues entrench themselves against being evacuated by the Israeli army. However, while Hasfari is vehemently critical of the disastrous messianic tendencies he recognizes in the Jewish religious right, Hazan and Maimon are far more empathic to this social group (of which they are part). They display its inner conflicts and uncertainties regarding the meaning of the moment in which the characters live in the context of the wider historical arc of promised divine redemption in which they believe. In this play, during the night of the expected evacuation, the settlers assemble in the local synagogue in order to pray and perform the ritual of *tikkun khatsot*. The settlement's rabbi makes a direct linkage between the night and exile, and through direct allusions to several texts we have seen above, interprets the upcoming evacuation as an exilic phase on the longer journey towards redemption:

לא מצאתי תפילה ראויה יותר בשעה זו מאשר תיקון חצות. הרב קוק מדבר על הלילה כמשל לגלות. הלילה הוא חשוך, ומפחיד.  
 כך היא הגלות. איילת השחר היא הגאולה, כשהאור מפציע ושוטף את כל העולם ואז אנחנו מבינים שהלילה היה רק אבן דרך במסלול אל הגאולה. האור הכי גדול הוא זה שבא מתוך החושך.

[I couldn't find a more appropriate prayer for this moment than *tikkun khatsot*. Rabbi Kook speaks about the night as an allegory for exile. The night is dark, and scary.

So is exile. The break of dawn is redemption, when the light emerges and bathes the whole world, and then we realize that the night was only a milestone in the way towards redemption. The greatest light is the one which comes out of darkness. (Hazan and Maimon 2017)]<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The play has not yet been published. I thank Amichai Hazan for providing me with a copy of the text. All quotations are from this copy.

When one of his students asks the rabbi why a prayer about exile and the disasters of Jewish history (such as pogroms and the Shoah) is relevant to the night's events, he replies: "It is exactly the same thing. Tonight's evacuation joins a long list of calamities that the Jewish people had suffered, but it is all part of the process of redemption". The play is also structured by the Talmudic "three watches" of the night, cited above, and their respective signs – a braying donkey, barking dogs, a suckling infant and a conversing couple – are all interpreted by the rabbi as symbolizing the various stages in the process of redemption. Nightly rituals and texts therefore serve as a prism through which history is both analyzed and experienced.

The younger generation in the settlement is more oppositional and anarchistic in nature than the rabbi. They are not satisfied with merely praying in the synagogue, but demand physical action against the Israeli army. Shuvel, the rabbi's rebellious son, says: "we are not in exile anymore, and therefore it is time to stand up and stop the evacuation". To which the rabbi retorts: "We are not going to stop the evacuation. We pray so that we may get enough strength to understand how the evacuation is part of redemption". For the rabbi, night is not only the time in which the characters gather to discuss Jewish history and the place of the present in it. Rather, it is the main image of said history, and one that is activated through ritual. However, Shuvel refuses to interpret the current historical moment as night. For him, as the inheritor of the religious-messianic interpretation of Zionism, the current historical moment in which a sovereign State of Israel exists, is already after the break of dawn. Therefore, the nocturnal practice itself must change: "I am done with talking. It is time for action. You can continue with your *tikkun*. I am going to do the real *tikkun*". Shuvel therefore maintains that changes in the understanding of history also entail changes in the actions at nighttime: a shift from ritual performance to a guerilla one. In fact, by calling his guerilla acts *tikkun*, Shuvel imbues his actions with theological meaning – turning them into a new kind of militant ritual. The secular sphere of politics and military action is fully sacralized.

As opposed to *Tashmad*, *Tikkun khatsot* does not end with catastrophe but with resolution. After a series of revelations about the various characters, the play turns introspective and examines the inner dynamics within the community that brought about such crisis. The rabbi understands his own mistakes that alienated his son and others, and admits to them. At the same time, the play does not end with the violent confrontation with the Israeli army urged on by Shuvel, but rather with prayer and the recital of Psalms with hopes that the evacuation will stop. In this sense, the rabbi's more moderate approach and appeal to traditional ritual rather than military action seem to prevail. While *Tashmad* sees the messianic undercurrent in the religious Zionist interpretation of time as a looming threat, a ticking

bomb literally waiting to explode, *Tikkun khatsot* sees this undercurrent as a given and adheres to it, while also insisting on its non-violent strands and internal mechanisms of containment. The debate takes place within a shared understanding of history, rather than against it. Yet both plays, however diametrically opposed they are in terms of political stance, realize the theological potential bestowed upon nighttime by religious traditions to serve as vehicle for the modern theatrical analysis of time.

### **Secular Nocturnal Ritual: *Night of the Twentieth***

My final example was written and staged prior to *Tashmad* and *Tikkun khat-sot* but I discuss it after them since the nightly rituals depicted in it in order to tackle Jewish history are not explicitly religious at all. Nevertheless, I wish to argue that it serves as a subtler case-study of the ways in which nighttime permeates Israeli drama as a time to think about time. This example is Joshua Sobol's highly canonical 1976 play, *Night of the Twentieth*. The play was part of a new wave of playwriting in the 1970s and 1980s, a period in which fractures within Israeli society were deepened and doubts regarding the righteousness of the Zionist project surfaced.<sup>17</sup> It is in this context that *Night of the Twentieth* utilized nocturnal performance in order to probe into the roots of Zionism and analyze its fundamental tensions and anxieties.

The play follows a small group of young, secular Socialist-Zionist pioneers in the 1920s. It takes place during the titular night of the twentieth of October, which is the group's last night in their settlement upon a small hill in Palestine before leaving in the morning in order to fight the local Arab population. They spend the night in long and heated debates in which they try to figure out what is the meaning of their presence in Palestine, what motivates them, and what kind of new society they wish to establish there. The play is based on *Kehilyatenu* ("Our Community"), a collection of texts by the pioneers of the Bitaniya group published in 1922. The Bitaniya group was a small group of young adults (the eldest was 23 years old) who settled for Zionist pioneer work for around six months, between the summer of 1920 and the winter of 1921, not far from the Sea of Galilee. It was a highly intellectual and ideological group who worked in agriculture during the days. At nights, they were engaged in folk-dancing and in communal confessional discussions. These conversations had a strong ritualized air to them, and aimed at creating a new utopian society, without barriers between people. Texts written by and about the group tell of an intense ideological and spiritual atmosphere and a taxing demand for self-reflection, exposure,

<sup>17</sup> For further discussions of the play, see Abramson 1998, 84-92; Katriel 2004, 113-22.

and improvement that took its toll on the individuals' emotional welfare, with the nightly confessions including many moments of breakdown and tears (Katriel 2004, 29-71). Even though the Bitaniya group stayed together only for a short while, they have quickly achieved a mythic-like status in the Zionist imagination and in Hebrew culture (Keshet 2009). For the current discussion, it is important to note that although the Bitaniya group, like other early Zionist Socialists, was composed of secular Jews, they have devised their own modern nightly rituals, aimed at a new kind of *tikkun*.

In *Night of the Twentieth*, these nightly rituals revolve around issues of Jewish history, myth, and the emerging modern nation. As part of the characters' self-examination, and the dissection of their own motivation at the pivotal historical moment of which they are part, they question the role of messianic myths in the new national culture, and the possibility of both personal and collective redemption within the framework of the Zionist enterprise. Throughout the nightly debates, the characters lay themselves bare, both physically and emotionally, and expose their doubts and insecurities, as well as the possibility that Zionist ideology might have served them as an escape route from their own personal problems. Consequently, the very meaning and structure of Jewish history are undermined.

The place of religious myth in the interpretation of historical time is at the center of one of the play's main conflicts, between Ephraim and Moshe, two potential leaders of the group. Ephraim conceives the entire Zionist endeavor in clearly redemptive terms. According to him, the pioneers "hold in their hands the messianic yearnings of an entire nation, of an entire humankind" (15), their joint meals are rituals "at the communal altar", and they have the power to redeem themselves and the land (16).

Moshe, on the other hand, is vehemently opposed to Ephraim's messianic-ritualistic language. He despises the role of mythical symbols, and of religion at large, in the lives of societies and individuals. He describes himself as a person who has "no Holy of Holies" in his life, which is "entirely profane from beginning to end" (48). Similarly, he rejects any mythical notion of Jewish nationalism and history or any spiritual or theological conception of the Land of Israel (50-1). Writing in the 1970s, when the *Gush Emunim* movement was beginning to flourish, Sobol notes that the theological-spiritual image of the land was at the roots of secular Zionism as well, and offers its denouncement through Moshe's stricter sense of secularism. Through his eyes, Ephraim's Zionism is revealed as a religious drive in secular garb. It is noteworthy that Moshe is the only one of the group that comes from a religious Hasidic background. The rest of the group grew in liberal, assimilated Central-European families, and are fascinated by the mythical allure that their upbringing failed to provide them. Moshe, on the other hand, unequivocally left religion behind and is therefore wary of its return through the

seemingly secular Zionist imagination. For him, the mythical understanding of Jewish history stems from existential weakness. The pioneers' loneliness and fear lead them to re-embrace religious symbolism, now disguised in national-secular garb, in a desperate search of meaning (52-3). Moshe's counterargument is that life's meaninglessness can only be remedied through extremely honest interpersonal relationships, and he considers the inability to form such relationships to be the true "exile" that is inside each and every one of the group (34). Exile here is not a territorial condition, nor a political lack of sovereignty or metaphysical state of the cosmos, but first and foremost a psychological hindrance that shuts one person away from the other. If Zionism is to rectify exile in any way, Moshe seems to imply, it is not by returning the Jews to their homeland but by establishing a utopian collective of individuals within humankind. The nightly confessions for Moshe, then, are another variation on nocturnal rituals that aim at dealing with exile and redemption, but these have little to do with Jewish national history, but rather with a human openness to the vulnerability of living together.

In the play's epilogue, Moshe addresses the audience:

עוד מעט יאיר השחר. נעמים את עצמנו על האוטומובילים, ונרד מההר. ובשם כל מיני מלים גדולות שאין להן שום קשר למה שקורה אותנו, דחופים, בהולים, מכוח כל מה שנשאר מעורבב וחסר-צורה בנפש, נצא להילחם עם בני-אדם אחרים, נבוכים ומדמדמים כמונו. להרוג וליהרג. ומי שלא היה פה הלילה, ליל העשרים באוקטובר, יוכל אחר-כך לספר אגדות לילדים על הדברים שהאמנו בהם, ובשם יצאנו לרשת בני-אדם אחרים. לרשת ארץ. והזמן, כמו ילד קטן שאינו יודע מה הוא עושה, הוא כבר ישחק בנו את משחקיו.

[Soon dawn will break. We will load ourselves on the automobiles and get down from the hilltop. And in the name of many grand words that have nothing to do with what happens with us, urgent, rushing, compelled by the force of all that was left messy and shapeless in the soul, we will leave to fight other people, who are perplexed and confused as we are. To kill and to be killed. And whoever was not here tonight, the night of the Twentieth of October, can later tell tales to children about the things we believed in, and in the name of which we left to inherit other people, to inherit a land. And Time, like a small child who has no idea what he's doing, It will play Its games with us. (68)]

With the transition from night to day, with the arrival of dawn, the perception of time and history shifts as well. If night is the time for relentless internal and interpersonal probing into the soul, the day of light covers all these and creates a coherent ideological narrative, giving the historical moment a meaning far removed from the one that was actually experienced by the pioneers. Time is presented here as a small child, playing games with the people living and acting in its confines – but also as being equally lost as they are. While the traditional *tikkun khatsot* is a nightly ritual that turns time into a

meaningful narrative, with an arc from exile to redemption, here the structure is subverted. The nightly rituals of *Night of the Twentieth* reveal that the very narrative of exile-to-redemption is itself the narrative of daylight. It is the story told by those who don't know (or wish to conceal) the messiness of nighttime. Daylight tells a story that denies the truth of historical time, the "large" time, while the night, the "small" time, reveals it. This truth is the very fact that time itself is a random game rather than a well-designed narrative of redemption. If night is still a time in which one thinks time, then its outcome is the nocturnal undermining of time's imagined structure.

## Conclusion

The plays discussed here vary from each other in many meaningful ways. Some of them, like *Night of the Twentieth*, are central in the Israeli dramatic canon, while others, such as *Tikkun khatsot*, operate at the periphery of the Israeli theatrical field. They were composed at different historical moments in Israeli history, and offer divergent interpretations of Jewish history and of the present. In all of these plays, conflicts between religion and secularity take place within particular historical periods, but they also dramatize and participate in the debate between religious and secular interpretations of these periods, and of time in general.

*On This Night*, written during Zionism's early moments in Palestine, dramatizes a pivotal historical moment of the legendary past through the lens of the contemporaneous conflict between religious tradition and Zionist revolutionary secularism. By the 1970s, however, Sobol interrogates the implicit theological undercurrents of the seemingly secular Zionist mainstream. In *Tashmad* and *Tikkun khatsot* these undercurrents are made explicit through religious Zionism – either to be harshly critiqued by Hasfari or embraced by Hazan and Maimon. The latter play (and the most recent of the four) is the only one that does not maintain a secular stance in its analysis of Jewish history and the Israeli present. To be sure, at the moment religious-Zionist theatre operates at the fringes of the Israeli theatrical scene, which is still mostly secular. Time will tell whether *Tikkun khatsot* signals a new phase in religious Zionism's place in Israeli theatre and culture, and of its voice in the processes of shaping the Israeli temporal imagination.

However, all of these plays, despite their considerable differences, share the dramatic utilization of nighttime as a time to reflect upon Jewish history, the present and the future. As such, they all continue – each in its own way – a longer Jewish tradition of nocturnal performance. They might also shed light on other Hebrew and Israeli plays with nocturnal plots, such as Leah Goldberg's *Lady of the Palace* (first performed 1955) and Hanoch Levin's



*The Child Dreams* (first performed 1992), which also engage with questions of Jewish history and temporality even without explicitly evoking Jewish nightly traditions.

Beyond that, a focus on the function of nighttime as a dramatic time in Hebrew theatre reveals a wider phenomenon: the participation of a modern, mostly secular, theatre in longer performative traditions that originally took place in synagogues and other spaces of worship. Despite its prominent secularism, Hebrew and Israeli theatre nonetheless continues to offer its audience a performance space that echoes, preserves and transforms earlier religious practices. The endurance of performance practices, from religious rituals to the theatre – such as the nightly performances discussed above – is surely not without fundamental shifts in their tone, ideology, meaning and function. Nevertheless, tracing such dynamics might enable us to fully rearticulate Hebrew theatre's internal performative traditions not only in terms of breach and innovation, but also of continuity and cohesion.

## Works Cited

- Abramson, Glenda. 1998. *Drama and Ideology in Modern Israel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ashkenazi, Yair. 2017. "Banned Play on Palestinian Prisoners, Occupation Throws Israeli Theater Festival Into Turmoil".  
<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-play-on-palestinian-in-mates-banned-at-israeli-festival-1.5480204> (Accessed 15 August 2020).
- Bistritzky, Nathan. 1935. *On This Night: a Play from the Days of Jerusalem's Destruction in Four Acts*. Jerusalem: Reuven Mass.
- Boyarin, Daniel. 1997. "Masada or Yavneh? Gender and the Arts of Jewish Resistance". In *Jews and Other Differences: the New Jewish Cultural Studies*, edited by Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, 306-29. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Caspi, Zahava. 2013. "Black Rain: the Apocalyptic Aesthetic and the Spectator's Ethical Challenge in (Israeli) Theater". *SubStance* 42 (2): 141-58.
- Chowers, Eyal. 2012. *The Political Philosophy of Zionism: Trading Jewish Words for a Hebraic Land*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hasfari, Shmuel. 1982. *Tashmad*.  
<https://www.hasfari.net/untitled-c1hi2> (Accessed 15 August 2020).
- Hazan, Amichai, and Oshri Maimon. 2017. *Tikkun khatsof*, unpublished manuscript.
- Katriel, Tamar. 2004. *Dialogic Moments: from Soul Talks to Talk Radio in Israeli Culture*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Keshet, Shula. 2009. *The Point of Genesis: the Afterlives of the Bitaniya Myth in Hebrew Literature*. Bnei Brak: Hakibbutz Hameuhad.
- Levy, Shimon. 1998. "The Dybbuk' Revisited: Images of Religious Jews on the Israeli Stage". *Israel Affairs* 4 (3-4): 218-29.



- Limon, Jerzy. 2015. "Time in Theatre". In *Performance Studies: Keys Words, Concepts and Theories*, edited by Bryan Reynolds, 215-26. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 2010. *The Chemistry of the Theatre: Performativity of Time*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Magid, Shaul. 1996. "Conjugal Union, Mourning, and 'Talmud Torah' in R. Isaac Luria's *Tikkun Hazot*". *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah* 36: xvii-xlv.
- Marx, Dalia. 2010. "An Ancient Myth Serving the Present: the Exit of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai of Jerusalem and the Establishment of Yavneh". *Akdamot* 24: 156-76.
- Milikowsky, Chaim. 1997. "Notions of Exile, Subjugation and Return in Rabbinic Literature". In *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish and Christian Conceptions*, edited by James M. Scott, 265-95. Leiden: Brill.
- Ohana, David. 2010. *Political Theologies in the Holy Land: Israeli Messianism and Its Critics*. London: Routledge.
- Pavis, Patrice. 1998. *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis (Gledališki slovar)*. Translated by Christine Shantz. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Ravitzky, Aviezer. 1996. *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*. Translated by Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Raz-Krakotzkin, Amnon. 2013. "Exile, History and the Nationalization of Jewish Memory: Some Reflections on the Zionist Notion of History and Return". *Journal of Levantine Studies* 3 (2): 37-70.
- Rozik, Eli. 2013. *Jewish Drama & Theatre: From Rabbinical Intolerance to Secular Liberalism*. Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press.
- Rokem, Freddie. 2000. *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- 1996. "Hebrew Theater from 1889 to 1948." In *Theater in Israel*, edited by Linda Ben-Zvi, 51-84. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Schneider, Rebecca. 2014. *Theatre & History*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 2011. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. New York: Routledge.
- Scholem, Gershom. 1971. *The Messianic Idea in Judaism, and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*. New York: Schocken Books.
- 1969. *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. New York: Schocken Books.
- Shem-Tov, Naphtaly. 2016. *Acco Festival: Between Celebration and Confrontation*. Boston: Academic Studies Press.
- Sobol, Joshua. 1990. *Night of the Twentieth*. Tel Aviv: Or Am.
- Tropper, Amram Don. 2005. "Yohanan ben Zakkai, *Amicus Caesaris*: a Jewish Hero in Rabbinic Eyes." *JSlJ* 4: 133-49.
- Urian, Dan. 2000. *The Judaic Nature of Israeli Theatre: a Search for Identity*. Translated by Naomi Paz. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers.
- Wiles, David. 2014. *Theatre & Time*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Yaari, Nurit. 2018. *Between Jerusalem and Athens: Israeli Theatre and the Classical Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zerubavel, Eviatar. 2003. *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



DIEGO ROTMAN\*

## Language Politics, Memory, and Discourse: Yiddish Theatre in Israel (1948-2003)

Abstract

This article deals with the dialogical relation between modern Hebrew culture and Yiddish culture as reflected in the discourse of both the Hebrew and Yiddish press about Yiddish theatre in the State of Israel between 1948 and 2003. By considering the struggle for power between Hebrew and Yiddish, I outline the establishment of Hebrew as the national language of the new state, as the local and native language, and as the language of power and knowledge. I illustrate that Hebrew's institutionalization occurred in tandem with a constant process of repression and alienation of Yiddish culture and language, as well as the repression and alienation of all the considered Diaspora cultures. If this cultural policy affected the economic conditions for the development of the Yiddish theatre in Israel, then the discourse about the Yiddish theatre in the press also affected the public reception and the public status of Yiddish theatre in Israel.

KEYWORDS: Yiddish theatre; Israel studies; Zionism; Jewish theatre

To understand the history of Yiddish theatre<sup>1</sup> in the State of Israel and the discourse about it, we have to consider the different factors that have directly or indirectly influenced this sphere: the cultural and linguistic policy toward Yiddish culture and language in Palestine and in the State of Israel, the intention of many Yiddish speakers to adapt themselves to the new and modern Hebrew culture and language in their new country (Mlotek 1995; Fishman 1976), and the doubts many Yiddish cultural activists had about

<sup>1</sup> The beginnings of professional Yiddish theatre are uncertain, but were attributed to Avrom Goldfaden who founded a professional troupe in 1876 in Iasi, Romania. There are many discussion and scholarly works regarding facts and mythology on the beginning of Yiddish theatre. It is well known that there were attempts already at the beginning of the nineteenth century to create professional Yiddish troupes in Warsaw. Yiddish theatre was transnational and started to develop not only in Eastern Europe; Yiddish troupes were also founded in Russia, Western Europe, South America, North America, South Africa, and Australia. On the history of Yiddish theatre, see Quint 2019; Auslaender 1940; Berkowitz 2008; Manger, Turkow, and Perenson 1968; Sandrow 1977; Shatzky 1930; Zylbercweig 1931-1960; and Stern 2011.

\* Hebrew University of Jerusalem – [diego.rotman@mail.huji.ac.il](mailto:diego.rotman@mail.huji.ac.il)

the possibility of continuity of Yiddish culture and language in Israel, specifically after the Holocaust.

In a recently published book on the history of Yiddish in Israel, Rachel Rojanski argues that “the steps taken against Yiddish theatre during the state’s first years had almost no direct influence on its development. They lasted for only a very short time and were not effectively enforced” (2020, 101-102). In this article, I will present a very different position to Rojanski’s statement on her understanding of this specific period and field. In this article, based on a close reading of the Hebrew and Yiddish press, archival research, and interviews with major figures of the Yiddish theatre, I will argue that the cultural and linguistic policy against the Yiddish theatre did in fact deeply influence the history and development of Yiddish theatre in Israel in a crucial way. My thesis is best illustrated by the practice of and discourse about Dzigal and Shumacher, key figures of the Yiddish stage, who died in Israel as permanent residents without even attaining Israeli citizenship as the result of the cultural and linguistic policy against Yiddish in Israel. Both research projects were conducted in tandem and influenced one another, and while there are several intersecting points, they arrive at different conclusions.

### 1. Language. Nation. Theatre.

Language as an indication of nationality is a common phenomenon in the formation of the modern nation-state. Language – like culture, race, or religion – was, as Elie Kedourie claimed, one of the defining signs in the national identity of communities, enabling the distinction between one national group and another (1994, 49-55). The choice of the national language and the choice of the relationship to minority languages (should they be preserved or acted against) are not limited to the question of integration, but also touch on the question of the legitimacy of the national culture and of the ideology on which the political system is based, as claimed by William Safran (1992). In the early days of the *yishuv*,<sup>2</sup> language was perceived as one of the central signs in defining the speaker’s identity. If an actor or a citizen wanted to be integrated into society, into the local normative Hebrew world, where the paradigm of “the negation of the exile” dominated the culture and social life (Raz-Krakotzkin, 1994), he had to give up signs of the diaspora, first and foremost Yiddish, the Jewish language still considered a threat to the revival of Hebrew.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Yishuv means “settlement” and the term refers to the body of Jewish residents in Palestine before the establishment of the State of Israel.

<sup>3</sup> The relationship between Hebrew and Yiddish in Palestine and in the State of Is-

Activities against Yiddish taken during the “language war” between Hebrew and Yiddish in the first decades of the 20th century were described by Yaakov Zerubavel (b. Vitkin), a leader of the Po’alei Zion Left Party (Workers of Zion) with a militant Marxist-Zionist and Yiddishist approach, and one of the founders of the political party Mapam (United Workers Party).<sup>4</sup> Zerubavel describes the activities in an article entitled *We Accuse and Demand Responsibility!* as follows: “Worse than the persecutions is the systematic pogrom – psychological and ideological – carried out by the official society against the rights of the Yiddish language” (quoted in Fishman 1981, 297-311). The title of the article, a paraphrase of Emile Zola’s article on the Dreyfuss affair, and the specific rhetoric used by Zerubavel reflect the interpretation of those attacks as a planned and organized process of ethnic and cultural oppression and discrimination. The construction of the new Hebrew language and culture was to be achieved by a parallel process of deconstruction of the Yiddish language and culture as well as all other Jewish diasporic languages and cultures.

With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the state developed a policy of supervision and control of culture and language in an attempt to determine a new cultural order in which Hebrew was the exclusive national language of the Jewish nation. In this new order, the Yiddish theatre – partly because of its popularity – was still perceived as a danger to the nation’s cultural and linguistic character in the first years of the state. Historian and Education Minister Ben-Tsion Dinur argued that “The common language is a precondition for the very existence of our people . . . In the Hebrew language, we say *uma ve’lashon* [nation and language] and use them almost as synonyms” (quoted in Rojanski 2020, 32). The state assumed the role of defending the people and the public from Yiddish theatre that, à la Dinur’s assertion, became an antonym to the idea of nation. In August 1949, this stance took on a legal aspect: the Films and Plays Censorship Committee barred local troupes from performing in Yiddish<sup>5</sup> and other languages

rael are a continuation of an inner change in the Jewish people that started with the Jewish Enlightenment movement and the process of modernization, which generated profound change in the approach to the traditional Jewish way of life. It was the time when national questions, including the status of Yiddish, became one of the central questions and topics of debate in the national political movements, reaching a climax at the Czernowitz Conference on Yiddish Culture (1908). Since the Second Aliyah (the second wave of Jewish big emigration to Palestine in the wake of pogroms in czarist Russia, 1904-1914), the movement attempting to revive the Hebrew language as the everyday language of the Jewish People in Palestine became a central cultural phenomenon. Concerning the status of Yiddish in Palestine between 1907 and 1948, see: Pilowsky 1986 and Chaver 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Acronym for *Mifletg hapoalim hameuhedet* [United Workers Party].

<sup>5</sup> The role of the Censorship Committee drew on the British Mandate’s Public Thea-

that were not Hebrew.<sup>6</sup> In the process of othering Yiddish in Israel, permission to appear in Yiddish was given only to guest troupes and actors from abroad. “It is the first time in the history of any country,” a journalist with the pseudonym of Ts. R-N (apparently Mordkhe [Mordechai] Tsanin) sharply penned that “a citizen has fewer rights than a foreigner” (1951). Indeed, an Israeli citizen, an actor, who dared perform in Yiddish or other mother tongue was considered more foreign than a foreigner. To perform in Yiddish meant to be a lawbreaker, or quoting Berachia in the newspaper *Davar*, an agent wreaking “social, cultural, national damage” (1952).

## 2. The Ban on Yiddish Theatre

Shimen Dzigán (1905-1980) and Yisroel Shumacher (1908-1961), the most important comic duo of 20th century Yiddish theatre,<sup>7</sup> staged their first performance as guest actors in Israel on March 16, 1950, in the Ohel-Shem Theatre in Tel Aviv. The decision to appear as guest artists, giving up their previous plan to immigrate to Israel from post-World War II Poland, was a consequence of the cultural and linguistic policy against Yiddish in Israel. This decision of more than anecdotal value: it confirms the negative influence of Israel’s cultural policy on the development of Yiddish theatre in Israel. In 1949, the pair applied in for immigrant visas<sup>8</sup> and their passports

tre Ordinance of 1927 and its amendment in 1937. According to these laws, those wishing to stage a play needed a permit from a commission lacking any official or clear guidelines or criteria. See also Rojanski 2020, 104.

<sup>6</sup> Performances in other languages were similarly banned. A performance by an Israeli amateur theatre that applied for a permit to perform in Bulgarian and Hebrew was denied, arguing that to perform in foreign languages is not allowed for local troupes (February-March 1951 State Archives, File Gimel-3578/54). The same argument was used against performances in German.

<sup>7</sup> Shimen Dzigán and Yisroel Schumacher began their professional artistic careers as actors in the experimental Yiddish theatre Ararat, established in 1927 under the direction of the poet Moyshe Broderzon, in Łódź, Poland. After a few years, they left together for Warsaw and founded an independent satirical theatre that would play a key role in Eastern Europe’s Jewish culture. Their theatre was characterized by sharp humour, witty political satire, and extraordinary acting ability. During World War II, they continued their artistic activity in the Soviet Union, where in 1941 they were arrested on the accusation of acting against the Soviet regime. In 1947, they returned to Poland and performed there for two years, until they left for a performance tour of Europe. They first performed in Israel in 1950, and acted together until they separated in 1960. Schumacher died in 1961 and Dzigán continued to appear with his satirical theatre in Israel and abroad until 1980. On Dzigán and Shumacher, see Rotman 2021 and Efron 2012.

<sup>8</sup> I recently had access to the private archive of the late Lidia Shumacher-Ophir and verified this documentation.



were stamped with the *olim hadashim* (new Jewish immigrants) stamps at the Israeli consulate in Warsaw in order to enter Israel. Nonetheless, Dzigán and Shumacher, the most popular artists of the Yiddish stage, decided to arrive in Israel as guest artists – as strangers – in order to retain their right to perform in Yiddish in Israel. Dzigán and Shumacher would move to Israel only in 1958, and live there as permanent residents for the rest of their lives.

Their first program in Israel, *Vayis'u vayahanu* [And they journeyed and pitched their tents], was an incredible success, both among audiences – the number of tickets sold broke the existing sales record in the Israeli theatre – and among theatre critics in the Hebrew and Yiddish press.<sup>9</sup> Their exceptional success intensified the perception on the part of the Israeli establishment that Yiddish theatre still posed a threat to Hebrew theatre and culture: at the beginning of May 1950, they were ordered to cease performing in Yiddish in Israel.

Unexpectedly, the guest actors received outstanding support from the Hebrew press, which was completely at odds with the general attitude expressed towards other actors of the Yiddish theatre. This included none other than Azriel Carlebach, the editor of the newspaper *Maariv*, who tried to raise public awareness of the unjust Israeli cultural policy towards the guest actors:

This evening, Dzigán and Shumacher will give their last performance with the permission of the State of Israel. From tomorrow onwards, these performances will be forbidden. The reasons given are highly important and persuasive: these two people are – Jews. Even worse than that: they are Jewish refugees . . . In France and wherever else they visit in Europe, they were received with open arms by the authorities and with enthusiasm by Holocaust survivors. They thought that they were also allowed to visit their thousands of veteran theatre-goers in the State of Israel . . . since they began performing in Israel – the police were sent after them. (1950)

Carlebach concluded his critical article with sharp irony, emphasizing that the pressure exerted on the artists was intended to force them to perform in Hebrew: “The trouble for Misters Dzigán and Shumacher is not so great. It’s easy to help them. All they have to do is convert” (1950).

<sup>9</sup> According to an article in *Maariv* on October 13, 1950: “The duo Dzigán and Shumacher became a big hit this season. Their takings passed the record in the history of miniature theatre in Israel. In the eighty performances given by Dzigán and Shumacher, the tickets were sold to the last one, and the theatres would have filled up had there been more performances” (M. in *Maariv* 1950). Considering the various reports in the press, in the first year in which they performed in Israel, around 400,000 theatre-goers attended their performances.

Two official reasons were given for banning their performances: their program was not submitted to the Films and Plays Censorship Committee for preview, and the same committee enacted a new restriction that allowed guest actors to appear for a total of six weeks, a retroactively calculated limit, in all likelihood created as a result of Dzigan and Shumacher's success during the first six weeks of their stay (State Archive, File Gimel 3577/12).<sup>10</sup> Thanks to the intervention of Carlebach<sup>11</sup> and Joseph Heftman, the chairman of the Journalists' Union and one of the former editors of the Yiddish newspaper *Der Moment* in pre-war Poland as well as Dzigan and Shumacher's skills in negotiating with the authorities, the two artists successfully managed to handle the Censorship Committee (State Archive, File Gimel 3577/12; ABA, file 164-04). According to the compromise reached, the artists were granted permission (letter dated May 15, 1950, sent to the artists at the Hotel Bristol in Tel Aviv and signed by Yaakov Kisilov) to continue performing their program in Yiddish on condition that their performances include Hebrew sections amounting to at least one-third of the entire program (ABA, File 146-04; Anonymous 1950a, *Hador*). To meet this condition, Dzigan and Shumacher, in typical 'trickster' fashion, hired a female singer who sang Hebrew songs between the skits (Boyarin, 1997).<sup>12</sup>

As a consequence of the public pressure, the Films and Plays Censorship Committee authorized the performance of a second program by Dzigan and Shumacher in Israel, *Tate du lakhst!* [Father, you laugh!] (1950), a permission granted on the basis that this be "the last program by Dzigan and Shumacher before they leave for abroad (M.D. in *Maariv*, 1950; State Archives,

<sup>10</sup> On March 13, 1950, the agent Ze'ev Markovitz submitted a request to the Films and Plays Censorship Committee asking for permission for Dzigan and Shumacher's performances. The duo began performing before receiving the authorization. After three performances, the first of which took place on March 16 in Tel Aviv, the second in Haifa on March 22, and the third in Jerusalem on March 23, 1950, the committee decided to prohibit the duo's performances (letter dated March 26, 1950 from the head of the committee Yaakov Kisilov to the Department for Criminal Identification and Investigation, Israeli police HQ). The head of the committee wanted to ask the police to stop the duo's performances (protocol of the meeting held on March 30, 1950). On April 9, 1950, the artists received a letter containing the longed-for permission (no. 78), which noted that, as guest artists, they were allowed to perform the program *Vayis'u vayahanu* until the end of April: "Further shows after this period will not be allowed".

<sup>11</sup> The minutes of the meeting of the Films and Plays Censorship Committee note the pressure of the press and the influence of Carlebach's article, which influenced the decision to grant the permission.

<sup>12</sup> A 'trickster' is, according to Daniel Boyarin, "that same folkloristic figure that exists in all the world, which represents the weak and whose wit can sometimes achieve controversial victories over the powerful" (1997, 147).

File Gimel 3577/70).<sup>13</sup> The same letter informed the artists that “the committee has decided not to continue granting these artists the right given to guest artists to stage performances not in the Hebrew language”. Thus the authorities sought to stop the continued existence of the duo’s theatre as long as they attempted to stage shows in Yiddish.

During the two years in which the prohibition was in place, permits to perform in Yiddish were issued to guest artists and singers visiting Israel, including Rachel Holzer, Maurice Schwartz, Yaakov Weislitz, Veronika Bal, Dora Kalinowna, Isa Kremer, Jenny Lubitz, Lola Folman, Moyshe Osher, Chayele Grober, Dzigan and Shumacher, and Avrom-Yankev Mansdorf (Kelmovitch). They were allowed to perform only on condition they include Hebrew in their performances, at times as much as fifty percent of their shows (State Archives, File Gimel 5549-07).

The activity of the Yiddish theatre by Israeli artists declined significantly during those years. Every attempt to create a stable Yiddish theatre company was persecuted.<sup>14</sup> For example, performing in December 1950, the Yafo profesyoneler Yidish teater [The Jaffa Professional Yiddish Theatre], founded by Joseph Lichtenberg,<sup>15</sup> was harassed by the police, though only after the theatre succeeded in staging *Dos volge meyd*, *Der vilner mentsh*, and *Kol nidre*.<sup>16</sup>

A theatre group named after Avrom Goldfaden, founded at the end of 1950 and active until 1953, was the first local professional theatre troupe to perform in Yiddish in the State of Israel, openly defying the prohibition on acting in Yiddish. David (Dovid) Hart, Nathan (Nosen) Wulfowitz, and Israel (Israel) Segal were members of this group, all of them new immigrants. The troupe succeeded in performing a number of shows mostly based on the classics of the Yiddish stage. The theatre did not attract much attention, nor was it hugely successful in terms of audiences. Its most important

<sup>13</sup> An article entitled *Sodot shel tsenzorim* [The secrets of the censor] claims that the permission would not have been granted were the actors not on the verge of departing for performances abroad. This is also evident from the protocol of the meeting of the Council for the Review of Films and Plays that took place on October 10, 1950. Seven days later (protocol of the meeting held on October 17, 1950), the council added a revision to the decision for permission no. 78, which was mentioned above: “The council expects their second program to include a significant Hebrew section . . . the council will not grant them further rights of guest actors and will not permit them to appear in a further program in Yiddish, not even partially”.

<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to ascertain the role of Hebrew in their programs.

<sup>15</sup> Lichtenberg was one of the founders of the Erszter Yidisher profesyoneler teater (The First Professional Yiddish Theatre) in the survivors’ camps after World War II.

<sup>16</sup> Eliezer Getler also produced popular Yiddish plays such *Yiddishe mame* and *Tsipke fayer* and was also called to court (Rojanski 2020, 107).

achievement lay, as Rojanski says, in creating a Yiddish repertory theatre in Israel and formally lifting the ban against Yiddish (2020, 108-21).

As a consequence of the prohibition on local artists to perform in Yiddish, the Avrom Goldfaden Theatre operated illegally and under difficult conditions, staging most of its performances in the Migdal-Or Garden in Giv'at Aliya in Jaffa, constantly enduring attempts by the police to prevent its performances by imposing fines and summoning the members to pay (N. Ch-shin 1952; Tsanin 1951). The cultural policy against Yiddish, waged only a few years after the Holocaust, was not just psychological oppression, as Rojanski states; it was also a very aggressive policy attempting to define a social paradigm or structure in which only foreigners could get permits to perform in Yiddish, though they were obligated to add Hebrew fragments as well. This policy influenced many Yiddish artists in their decision on where to settle in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust as they looked for a place to restart their careers (as evidenced in the case of Dzigán and Shumacher).

Tsanin, the legendary editor of the Yiddish newspaper *Letste Nayes*, referred to the fact that the current policy left the artists without any alternative but to perform against the law, in disreputable, primitive venues and settings (Drucker Bar-Am 2013; Rojanski 2020, 48-100). In explaining the state's tactics, Tsanin made it clear that the fines were not being given for performing in Yiddish, but for performing without permits (1951). The fines were not only symbolic; they were a clear discriminatory practice carried out by the hegemonic power. The policy affected the artists and the public emotionally, socially, and economically. The Israeli Yiddish actor was being legally punished because he was performing without a permit when it was a priori impossible to get a permit to perform in Yiddish; his mother tongue was deemed a betrayal to his new homeland (Tsanin 1951, 3). If he pretended to be part of society, part of the 'normal', he would have to erase all the signs of the diaspora, particularly his language.

The social and political pressure created by Dzigán and Shumacher's performances in Israel (the most successful Yiddish theatre in Israel ever); the pressure generated by the activism of Avrom Goldfaden Theatre (who performed in Yiddish despite the prohibitions); and petitions the theatre submitted to the High Court of Justice – all these resulted in the ban on local actors performing in Yiddish being lifted on July 18, 1951 (Rojanski 2020, 108-21). Rojanski argues that, after the restriction was repealed, Yiddish theatre failed to thrive. What Rojanski does not mention is that the theatre had already started to include Hebrew fragments in its performances, and in fact Avrom Goldfaden Yiddish Theatre became transitional en route to

becoming part of the Hebrew theatre.<sup>17</sup> On July 20, 1951, the Films and Plays Censorship Committee announced that the prohibition to perform in Yiddish was no longer in force (State Archives, File Gimel 5549-07).<sup>18</sup>

### **3. From Juridical Practices to Economic and Rhetorical Oppression**

Once the ban was lifted, the means of oppression and enforcing the hegemony became more sophisticated. In spite of its success in terms of popular acclaim, Yiddish theatre was ignored by the local discourse in the Hebrew press about theatre and culture until the middle of the 1960s. The ban on performing in Yiddish without a permit was replaced by an economic and cultural policy, on the one hand, and by a silent and later pejorative discourse in the Hebrew press, on the other.<sup>19</sup>

Yiddish changed its status from “a language forbidden to Israelis” – at least in the field of the theatre – to that of “a foreign language”, even though it was the only or first language of 33.3 per cent of the Jewish population (524,000) in the 1950s and 22.7 per cent of the Jewish population (446,200) in 1961 (Fishman 1991, 401). The definition of Yiddish as a foreign language was another expression of the ‘emigration policy’ towards Yiddish culture, which tried to expel this culture and language from the local cultural landscape. This policy had not only psychological connotations; it also generated economic discrimination that turned into one of the central means of cultural oppression: taxes and fines imposed on theatres performing in foreign languages, on the one hand, and the official budget policy, which rejected support for the Yiddish theatre, on the other.

According to the Yiddish press, the lack of support for the development of Yiddish theatre was an expression of the culture discrimination against Yiddish culture and one of the main reasons that a Yiddish art theatre could not develop in Israel. According to the Hebrew press, the policy was a direct and appropriate response to the quality of Yiddish theatre. The main reason, however, remained ideological. “In fact”, wrote theatre critic Boaz

<sup>17</sup> In a letter written in April 20, 1972 to the Minister of Culture Sh. Dinaburg (later Ben-Tsion Dinur), they mention the inclusion of Hebrew as part of their performances. See State Archives, File Gimel 1091-39.

<sup>18</sup> The prohibition to perform in German would last until 1958. There is a language hierarchy. In a protocol from a meeting of the Films and Plays Censorship Committee dated March 13, 1951, Kisilov wrote in a session: “I agree an absolute prohibition cannot be applied to Yiddish. Each one of us has a special feeling for Yiddish since childhood. A total prohibition we give to plays in German, German is not like Yiddish. We could forbid German but not Yiddish with a clear conscience. To do that would raise a very critical reaction”.

<sup>19</sup> There were exceptions with the visits of artists from abroad.

Evron in the daily *Yedioth Ahronoth*, “the existence of such an institution [Yiddish theatre], would just slow down the natural and necessary transition of immigrant theatre people to the Hebrew stage” (1975, 27). There was no possibility and no reason to try to revive Yiddish culture and language in Israel, Evron said, and therefore there was no need to support the development of this culture (1975).

#### 4. The Yiddish Theatre in the Hebrew Press

If the official cultural and economic policy towards Yiddish theatre decisively influenced the local development of the Yiddish theatre, it would be the discourse developed by the Hebrew press that would finally stigmatize the Yiddish theatre in Israel. With the exception of the references to Dzigal and Shumacher and to visits by other Yiddish ‘stars’ from abroad, the approach of the Hebrew press to the Yiddish theatre was, until the mid-1960s, characterized by a near-total silence. This was both the central means for erasing any remnants left by the Yiddish theatre in Israel and an expression of its rejection (Aloni 1984, 14; Adar 1986, 9). Yiddish theatre, which in the 1950s was expanding and growing on the streets, was rhetorically erased from the Israeli cultural map (Anonymous 1954, *Haaretz*, 1-2). Only a few remarks about Yiddish theatre are to be found, usually in the form of very harsh critiques. An example of the tone is given by Ts. Berachia who wrote:

All those Yiddish theatres which have lately sprung up like mushrooms after the rain and whose artistic values are nil – what about the damage they cause, in the name of whom? Why not restrain them? . . . The Yiddish theatre sabotages our educational system. It causes explicit damage from a cultural, social, and national point of view.  
(1952)

To understand the scope of the Yiddish theatre production starting in the mid-1950s, it is necessary to look at alternate sources, especially in the Yiddish press of that time. This is what a *Yedioth Ahronoth* journalist did: in 1962, he ‘discovered’ the hidden dimension of the Yiddish theatre in the Yiddish press and shared his conclusion with his readers. He calculated that Yiddish theatre, which had eight different troupes performing 54 shows in a period of eight weeks, had an average of 500,000-600,000 people visiting it a year – a bigger audience than the Cameri and Habima theatres (Shin, 1962).

There is no doubt that Israel’s Yiddish-speaking citizens found a vital cultural expression in the Yiddish theatre they were not able to find on the Hebrew stage. When looking at the numbers, the feeling of threat is understandable: Yiddish theatre as a whole was much more successful in terms

of the audience than the Hebrew stage. It was doing great business, despite the taxes and the politics against it. The Yiddish theatre, according to a statement by a Hebrew theatre producer, could actually extend economic help to the production of performances in the Hebrew theatre (quoted in Shin, 1962).

Among the artists performing in the Yiddish theatre starting in the 1950s were Max Perlman and Gite Galina, Henri Gerro and Rosita Londner, Eni Liton, Shimen Dzigán and Yisroel Shumacher, Michael Grinshteyn, Yehudit Kronenfeld, Bebe Szpitser, Annabella, Zigmunt Turkow, Yaakov Alperin, and Yaakov Bodo (starting in the 1980s). Among the guest artists visiting from abroad to whom the press paid attention were Joseph Buloff, the Burshteyn Family, Maurice Schwartz, and Ida Kaminska.<sup>20</sup> In the few cases where the Hebrew press allowed itself to mention important actors and directors of the Yiddish theatre, it described them as actors and directors of the Jewish – not Yiddish – stage in a rhetorical expression of cultural translation. In this way, Joseph Buloff was described as “One of the great artists of the Jewish stage who earned a name for himself also in the non-Jewish American theatre” (Anonymous in *Yedioth Ahronoth* 1950b, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 4). Maurice Schwartz was treated similarly. Most of the plays were written by playwrights of the popular Yiddish theatre, others were from the classics of Yiddish art theatre, and still others were translations from European theatre, with very few translated from Hebrew.<sup>21</sup>

## 5. The Aesthetic Threat

In the 1960s, when it was no longer possible to ignore the important pres-

<sup>20</sup> Among the many plays performed in the commercial and popular Yiddish theatre, which gave in some way an indication of the popular genre of those performances are: *Der Shtroyener Held* [The Straw Hero] (1954), *Vintshn mir mazl-tov* [We Wish You Good Luck] (1957); *Yoshke zukht ha kale* [Yoshke looks for a bride] (1960); *Oy vayber vayber* [Oh, Women, Women] (1960), *Alts tsulib parnose* [Everything for subsistence] (1961), *A man af exsport* [A man for export] (1961), played by Max Perlman and Gite Galina; *Der zingendiker milner* [The Miller Singer] (1964), *Der farlibter nar* [The Fool in Love] (1966), *Mazl-Tov yidn* [Good Luck Jews] (1968), played by Henri Gerro and Rosita Londner; *Ha harts vos benkt* [A Heart Misse] (1961), *Di shikerte* [The Drunk] (1966), played by Yudis Kronenfeld; *Di koshere shikse* [The Kosher Shikse (gentile girl)] (1961) by Bebe Shpiter; *Der komediant* [The Comedian] (1954); *Eybike kale* [Eternal Bride] (1963); *Ha khasene in shtetl* [A Wedding in the Shtetl (small town)] (1963), played by the Burshteyn Family.

<sup>21</sup> From the classics of Yiddish theatre were performed for example: *Yoshe kalv* by Y. Y. Singer (1960) and *Motke ganev* by Sholem Asch performed by the Maurice Schwartz Ensemble; *Tuvya the Milkman and his Seven Daughter* based on Sholem Aleichem’s novel (1961) and *Di brider Ashkenazi* based on Y. Y. Singer (1966), both performed by Joseph Buloff; *Kidush Hashem* (1960) by Sholem Asch and the Yidish folks-teater.



ence of Yiddish theatre in Israel, the Hebrew press started to develop a new type of cultural differentiation based on the principle of ‘taste’. A cultural dichotomy was created between a popular theatre of low artistic merit – associated with the Yiddish theatre – and a theatre of high artistic merit, represented in this discourse by the Hebrew theatre. Most of the plays performed on the Yiddish stage were described in the Hebrew press as being of very low quality that looked to the past and had only commercial intentions. These critiques developed a discourse that rejected the cultural value of the Yiddish language and culture, and contributed significantly to the development of the stigma of Yiddish theatre as a synonym for popular, commercial, and melodramatic theatre.<sup>22</sup>

The negative, even apocalyptic, criticism of Yiddish theatre had a precedent in the theatre criticism of the popular, commercial Yiddish theatre in Eastern Europe, where it was known as *shund*. In those reviews, popular theatre was made with the sole purpose of entertaining the audience and it lacked any artistic pretensions. The criticism was cutting, humiliating, and went so far as to define the genre as a ‘social illness, from which the society had to be cured. The literary critic Nakhmen Mayzel called the *shund* repertoire a “death drug repertoire” (1933, 709-10); Jonas Turkow referred to it as a “*shund* epidemic” (1938, 27); and Yisroel Shtern determined it to be a “*shund* pest” (1937, 699-700).

From a formalistic point of view, the reviews and critiques written in Israel in a similar tone seemed to be a continuation of the rhetoric against the popular *shund* theatre that started in Europe. But the main difference is that the critique written in Eastern Europe was against a certain type of Yiddish theatre, whereas in Israel, it was against the Yiddish theatre as a whole. In the discourse developed by the Hebrew press, the problem was not the *shund*, but rather all of Yiddish theatre. Despite the Dzigán and Shumacher, Eni Liton, The Three Shmuliks, *Di megile* productions (see above), and the successful visits by Maurice Schwartz, Joseph Buloff, and Ida Kaminska, Yiddish theatre became a synonym for bad theatre.

Dzigán and Shumacher’s continued career wandered between Israel and the diaspora. Their extended absences were a consequence of the bad state of Yiddish theatre in Israel, the high taxes the actors were forced to pay, and the existence of a large community in the diaspora that looked forward to seeing the duo’s theatre and could also significantly increase their profits. Only in 1957, was Yiddish theatre awarded a certain discount on its high

<sup>22</sup> There were exceptional and positive reviews about performance by Eni Liton, Dzigán and Shumacher, and other world figures of the Yiddish theatre who visited Israel.

entertainment tax, while Habima and Cameri theatres paid no taxes whatsoever.<sup>23</sup> In 1958, Dzigan and Shumacher decided to settle in Israel, though without becoming Israeli citizens. In 1958, in their efforts to obtain a tax reduction, Dzigan and Shumacher signed an agreement with the Pargod Theatre, managed by Eliyahu Goldenberg.<sup>24</sup> In return for adding a number of members of the troupe to their performances, the duo would receive the tax exemption that Pargod enjoyed as a Hebrew-speaking theatre (Rotman 2021).

In addition to Dzigan and Shumacher's acting talent, what fascinated most of the Hebrew theatre-goers and journalists was the duo's aptitude for decoding Israeli reality and translating it into critical, subversive political satire (Nahor, 1955; Anonymous, 1955a, *Maariv*).<sup>25</sup> In the critical rhetoric, the two were accorded the status of underground warriors. They were "the sniper artists" (Avrahami, 1955); "wielding the secret weapon" (Gelbert, 1958) whose "arrows are aimed . . . at people and organizations in the headlines (the government, the Histadrut [the nation's powerful labour union])" (Avrahami, 1955). The duo's power was poetically described by Emil Feuerstein, who also used military rhetoric: "In mere moments, they dismantle our weapons of opposition, we become their captives and they do with us as they please" (1958). Certain critics wrote against the great power of their satire, referring to its influence on a great number of spectators (Zonder, 1950).

During the 1950s, Dzigan and Shumacher succeeded in removing the negative label attached to everything called Yiddish theatre from their work, achieving a central status in theatrical reviews in the Hebrew press (and, of course, in the Yiddish press), and fighting the hostile cultural poli-

<sup>23</sup> A tax of between 15 and 20 per cent was imposed on theatres that did not perform in Hebrew. Thus, Dzigan reports that he received a special discount in 1968: "Because I act in Yiddish, I must pay an additional tax of 10 per cent of the price of a ticket. The Hebrew theatre does not pay this tax. And I also need to be happy and to say thank you that they don't take 20 per cent of the ticket price – as all the Yiddish theatres pay. This tax is a discriminatory tax for me" (quoted in A. L. in Davar, 1968).

<sup>24</sup> Eliyahu Goldenberg (1909–1976) was an actor, director, and announcer. At the beginning of the 1960s, Goldenberg was part of the original ensemble "the Three Shmuliks", with the actors Shmuel Rodansky and Shmulik Segal (after his death, he was replaced by Shmuel Atzmon-Wircer). The ensemble performed in Yiddish in various theatres in Israel and abroad.

<sup>25</sup> Regarding the extent to which they covered the Israel reality, an article in *Maariv* noted: "Numerous comments reflected the sensitivity of the visiting artists to the changes that have taken place in Israel since their last visit here, in the economic field (tax, the cancellation of the 'austerity' the pig war), in the cultural field ("Porgy and Bess"? . . .), and in the field of the party policy (Mapam and Sneh), elections and carnivals" (Anonymous 1955a, Hador). However other critics, like Nahor (1955), saw the references to Israel only as external clothing for duo's theatre.

cy towards Yiddish theatre in Israel (apart from the tax discrimination).

Despite their exceptionally positive reception, Dzigán and Shumacher continually found themselves facing the policy of discrimination against Yiddish theatre and the pressure of repeated demands that they perform in Hebrew. For the most part, the reviews and articles about their performances included expectations for a “Hebrew spirit in their performances”, complaints about the fact that they did not keep their promises to perform in Hebrew, and disappointment with the “insufficient amount of Hebrew in the performances” and “their zealous attachment to Yiddish” (Efrat., 1955; Ben-Meir 1959). Critics argued that Dzigán and Shumacher needed to “fulfil the duty to the language of the state in which they reside and are active”, be grateful for the credit given to them, and prove their desire to integrate into the society by immediately translating their art (Ben-Meir, 1958). According to another critic: “The great credit given to the two actors when they were still new immigrants was given conditionally . . . In the future, the State of Israel will also serve as a place of refuge for their art if this art will divest itself of the diaspora clothing and wear Hebrew uniform in sound and in style” (Nahor, 1953). Two years later, Nahor spoke out even more harshly:

Dzigán and Shumacher do not understand that the matter here is one of a national, cultural, and even economic revolution, and therefore it is impossible to allow them to perform in Tel Aviv in the same way as they once performed in Łódź and Warsaw. If they will not be with us, in the end they will be against us, and a great part of the last program was against us . . . If after four or five years of living here the two comedians do not feel obligated to appear even in one Hebrew section, this is a sign that they remain foreign and want to be strangers.  
(1955)

The reception of Dzigán and Shumacher as Israeli artists thus depended, more than anything else, on their willingness to change their language. They still needed to prove their place in the national revolution, or at least relate to it in polished Hebrew.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Dzigán and Shumacher eventually entered the canon of Israeli Hebrew in 2004, when an episode of a documentary series about Israeli humour by Anat Seltzer and Modi Bar-On (director: Avida Livni; investigative reporter: Assaf Galay) was dedicated to them. In the internal discourse of Yiddish culture, they reappeared when the Yidishpiel theatre, which was established in 1988 at the initiative of Shmuel Atzmon-Wircer with government support, devoted a show called *Di eybige Dzigán un Shumacher* [Dzigán and Shumacher Forever] to them (2004). The play was reported on in the Hebrew press. In 2013, the theatre staged a new play entitled *Dzigán un Shumacher knakn shoynt vider* [Dzigán and Shumacher Are Snapping/Resonating Again], a musical comedy by

The ambivalence towards the Israeli character of Dzigán and Shumacher and their theatre was characteristic of the approach among reviewers and politicians. It was espoused by those who wanted to adopt the talented, high-quality, popular artists as Israeli, yet at the same time found it difficult to accept a Yiddish theatre as an inseparable part of the Israeli cultural reality.

## 6. The Effect of the Israeli Cultural Policy on Artistic Activities in Yiddish

After the partnership with Pargod collapsed, Dzigán and Shumacher approached the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Finance in an attempt to receive a tax exemption. In a letter dated November 2, 1958, they declared their intentions: “To settle in Israel for real [!], despite our evident success abroad in various countries, where we succeeded not only in gaining support for ourselves but also for Israel among the diaspora” (ABA file 141-4). The letter concluded with a sophisticated argument, highlighting the political awareness of the artists and their typical behaviour vis-à-vis the authorities: “Let us just add that granting the requested exemption will make a better impression in the wide Jewish world in the diaspora and will demonstrate the democratic character of our state and its true liberal spirit, putting an end to the rumours that have spread in the diaspora regarding the discrimination and oppression of Yiddish and Yiddish speakers in Israel”. Thanks to the pressure exerted by then-Minister of Finance Levi Eshkol, the artists were granted an exemption from the stamp tax for a period of nine months.

By the end of 1959, Dzigán and Shumacher’s relationship had deteriorated badly (Anonymous 1955b, *Hador*).<sup>27</sup> Shumacher – who had not performed dramatic roles since his youthful appearances in the amateur theatre of the Hebrew gymnasium in Łódź – took a role in *Kidush hashem* by Shalom Asch, staged by the Yidish Folksteater [Yiddish people’s theatre] and directed by Yosef Sheyn (Adler, 1960). The role of the tailor in *Kidush hashem* was the last that Shumacher played on stage. He died on May 21, 1961, after an extended illness. Following Shumacher’s death and Dzigán establishing a new troupe, Dzigán published a declaration of principles according to which his new sa-

B. Michael and Ephraim Sidon, starring Yaakov Bodo and Dovele Glickman, and directed by Shmuel Atzmon-Wircer.

<sup>27</sup> As early as 1955, a disagreement between the artists was mentioned in the press: “Dzigán and Shumacher have fallen out. The two popular artists will continue to appear together and to cooperate in the artistic field but they will cease social interactions. They have stopped talking to each other”.

tirical theatre would perform in Yiddish, confront Israeli topics, reflect the daily reality in Israel, and continue to be faithful to the genre of miniature theatre, while returning to his artistic and cultural roots. Dzigan staged twenty-two new programs with his theatre. The performances included texts by many authors, classic and modern, original works in Yiddish, adaptations and translations, as well as texts and adaptations of his own.<sup>28</sup>

### 7. *Di Megile* at the Hammam Theatre in Jaffa

By the second half of the 1960s, partly as a consequence of the Eichmann trial (1961) and its influences on the Israeli public discourse on the Holocaust and Jewish diasporic life, Israeli society developed a certain openness to dealing with ethnic Jewish diasporic cultures and languages. However, Israeli society approached these cultures and languages not as concurrent with Hebrew culture and language but rather from a nostalgic vantage point and as part of the intangible heritage of the Jewish people and Israeli culture (Shapira 2004, 69-108). In the public discourse, this new approach also forged the image of Yiddish culture and language as 'folksy', rich in jokes, colourful, and still 'low' culture.

This decade also saw the Habima and Cameri theatres again performing pieces translated from the Yiddish repertoire.<sup>29</sup> This state of affairs, followed by the influence the Six-Day War exerted on Israeli society and culture, also laid the groundwork to a rediscovery of the Sephardic Ladino culture: in 1968 the *Romancero sefaradi*, a project created by Yitzhak Navon, based on Ladino songs and liturgy collected by Yitzhak Levy, made Sephardic culture a legitimate component of Israel's intangible heritage, garnering highly positive reviews and opening central venues to Sephardic culture, such as Tel Aviv's Mann Auditorium (the home of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra). The *Romancero* was not a one-time event: it was followed by *Bustan sefaradi*, also written by Navon and directed by Yossi Milo at Habima Theatre in 1969. Nonetheless, in the cultural discourse, it was still defined as 'popular', closer to folklore than to 'high' art.

<sup>28</sup> Among the writers whose texts Dzigan presented in his programs were Sholem Aleichem, Moyshe Nudelman, Hayim Ritterman-Abir, Al. Aksteyn, Avrom Shulman, Yosef Vinitsky, Yosef Heilbum, and Efraim Kishon.

<sup>29</sup> In the Habima theatre, for example, after a long period with no performances translated from Yiddish, a new version of *Tuvia the Milkman* (1959) and *Hard to be a Jew* (1965) was staged; both based and translated by Sholem Aleichem. In 1966, it staged *Yitshik Vaytenberg* [The bird of the Ghetto], originally written in Yiddish by Hava Rozenbarg. In 1970, the theatre staged only two performances translated from the Yiddish repertoire, and in 1980 five pieces translated from Yiddish.

This, then, was the cultural atmosphere in 1965, when Shmuel Bunim, a young, promising Hebrew theatre director, who had never before worked in Yiddish theatre, approached one of the most popular theatre venues of Hebrew entertainment venues – the Hammam Theatre in Jaffa whose artistic directors were Dan Ben-Amotz and Haim Hefer, Bunim's colleagues from Batsal Yarok. He proposed that, together, they realize his dream of staging Itzik Manger's *Megile lider* in Yiddish at the Hammam with its very strong *sabra* (native-born Jewish Israeli) identity (Bunim 1994, 333).<sup>30</sup> The first attempt was made with actors of the Hebrew theatre who knew Yiddish, but it did not work well. The play, based on Manger's personal, poetic, 'folk' approach to the *purimshpiel* (amateur folk plays performed on the Feast of Purim when Jewish tradition condones theatrical performances), was finally performed by the Burshteyn Family from the Yiddish popular theatre, featuring Perele Manger, Zishe Gold, and Bruno Fink – all actors on the Yiddish stage. It became one of the most successful productions in Yiddish in Israel, with more than 300 of presentations in Israel, New York and Buenos Aires.

It is interesting to note that Manger's *Megile lider* [Songs from the Book of Esther] and *Khumesh lider* [Songs of the Pentateuch] were written as a response to a performance in Hebrew of *Yaakov and Rachel* by Krashnikov, a melodrama based on a biblical theme, performed in an adaptation translated by Avraham Shlonski (Shaked 2004, 43-62). Manger saw this Ohel Theatre performance in 1934 in Poland. In this work, he identified a clear ideological Zionist approach to Jewish history and mythology, in which the image of the Biblical Jew was imagined as a Bedouin or Palestinian peasant (then emerging as a major identity option for Jews settling in Palestine in the first decades of the *yishuv*) (Zerubavel, 2008). His *Khumesh lider* was a reaction to that interpretation and became a project of cultural re-appropriation, or perhaps a translation of the Jewish mythos and history into Ashkenazi Yiddish culture (Sadan 1984, 27-46). The *Megile lider* is a poetic work with a lot of humour, a folksy atmosphere, and *midrash*<sup>31</sup> done in the tradition of the *purimshpiel*. It is a piece about Purim, about reversal,<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Bunim had started his career as a theatre director in 1953 in the Cameri Theatre. *Di megile* was the first piece he directed in Yiddish. Bunim knew Yiddish and saw a theatre-marionette performance of the *Khumesh lider* in Yiddish in Paris, where Manger's introduction to the performance profoundly affected him. *Di megile lider* were published in 1936 and *Khumesh lider* in 1935, both in Yiddish in Warsaw.

<sup>31</sup> *Midrash* is a mode of biblical interpretation prominent in the Talmudic literature. It can be used as here, as a way to refer to modern or contemporary interpretations of biblical or Talmudic texts.

<sup>32</sup> The Feast of Purim celebrates the miraculous deliverance of the Jewish people in the Greater Persian Empire (circa 500-400 BCE) through the intervention of Queen Es-

about changing destiny. The style of the *mise en scène* at Hammam added a contemporary modern approach to folk and Yiddish culture, a sense of renewal to popular Yiddish theatre, and a surprising approach to Yiddish culture in the Hebrew theatre milieu (Stern 2011, 31-3; Burshteyn in Goldfinger 1999). “We took Yiddish and with it made a modern play”, said Bunim. “It was the only possible way of bringing popular Jewish theatre like that to the Israeli public – making theatre with classic Jewish materials put through a modern blender” (quoted in Yas, 1988).

At first, recognition of the piece as successful, outstanding theatre didn’t come from the Yiddish public or from the traditional public of the Hammam, but rather from the Hebrew press. After a month of performing for a very small audience, the Hebrew press – which had already given Manger a positive reception in his previous visits to Israel,<sup>33</sup> and in its first reviews saw the play as devoted to a Yiddish audience – suddenly gave *Di megile* a totally new interpretation in his review in *Maariv*:

Spicy pleasure like a glass of *yash* [a type of distilled liquor] drinking for the creators and the creation, a dizzying dance like a mitzvah dance<sup>34</sup> that dances to the heart of a bride and groom, a heartfelt delight like a Yiddish folk song whose simple words are saturated with the laughter and weeping of generations – such was the encounter we had with the Hammam Theatre and the “Megillah Songs” by the Yiddish poet Itzik Manger . . . and this poetry is a folk symphony, so simple in its expressions and so exuberant in originality with fireworks in its revelations.  
(Feingold, 1965)

The new social and political conditions created an atmosphere that allowed

ther. Instead of being exterminated, the Jews take revenge on their enemies and the arch-fiend Haman – who is said to rank only after the emperor at the beginning of the story – is hanged on the same tree where he had planned to hang his Jewish arch-rival, Mordechai. The *Megile lider* is about reversal in the way anthropologist Max Gluckman defines the major paradox of rituals of status-reversals that allow the outbreak of rebellion and subversion, which may finally lead to strengthening the established social order. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his influential *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics and Rabelais and His World*, extends the definition of the term ‘carnival’ to designate all forms of symbolic reversal undertaken in the spirit of laughter. Symbolic reversal can be applied to Manger’s *Megile lider* in this sense. See Gash, 1993.

<sup>33</sup> Manger’s poetry was first introduced to the Hebrew reader by means of Nathan Alterman’s translations. Alterman visited Israel in 1958, 1961 and later again for the performance of *Di megile*. He was always well-received by the press, cultural figures, and politicians.

<sup>34</sup> The Mizvah dance is the Hasidic wedding custom implying that a man dances before the bride with a kerchief between them after the wedding feast. Its origin goes back to the time of the Talmud, when a myrtle branch was used instead of a kerchief.



the presentation of a Yiddish work in a Hebrew venue directed by a Hebrew director. The great success of the play was a consequence of Manger's status in Israel and the fact that it was an Israeli director in an Israeli theatre who proposed a contemporary, modernistic approach to Manger's texts – still treating Yiddish as 'folk' culture, but clearly framed on the modern Hebrew *sabra* stage and modern way of exhibiting the 'native'. For all these reasons, the production didn't necessarily attract the typical Yiddish audience, but allowed non-Yiddish speakers, and those who didn't want to expose themselves as Yiddish-lovers or as members of the Yiddish theatre audience, to access the performance in a safe place. Moreover, Manger's texts were framed by Hefer's rhymed verse in Hebrew and the songs framed by Selzer's modern approach to Jewish music. Likewise, the scenography didn't try to represent the old shtetl, but rather depicted an abstract place (Yerushalmi 2005, 333-52; Rojanski 2020, 225-49). In that sense, *Di megile* was a performance in Yiddish with Yiddish actors, but without belonging to the milieu of Yiddish theatre and not produced for the Yiddish audience. Another factor that may allow us to understand the great success could be the fact that it was a modern version of a *purimshpiel*, a unique event in the history of the Israeli theatre that defined a Yiddish theatre performance as a guest and a once-a-year acceptable phenomenon.

*Di megile lider* was later performed in a Hebrew version without the same success, and later in Yiddish by the Yiddishpiel Theatre in 1988, again directed again by Bunim, but using a totally different approach. This time, the performance was presented as more of a nostalgic monument to the previous version than as the revolutionary performance it was the first time (Evron, 1988a).

## 8. Yiddish Theatre and Dzigán's Theatre in the 1970s

Dzigán's theatre began to encounter economic difficulties in the mid-1960s due to declining ticket sales, the lack of financial support, and the taxes imposed on the theatre. Dzigán referred to these issues repeatedly, both in skits and in the media (Bar-Yosef, 1968; Shmulevitsh, 1986). Taxation led to higher ticket prices and the theatre found it difficult to stage its programs for long runs: at the beginning of the 1960s, Dzigán's shows were staged around 150 times over six months, whereas by the end of the decade no show was staged for more than three months. According to Dzigán, such a number of shows in Israel could not cover costs and he was forced to rely on his tours abroad (Na'aman, 1975; Rimon, 1967). In 1962, Dzigán was forced to reduce his troupe and the number of times each program was performed due to the number of theatre-goers and contend with significant fi-

nancial losses (Janasowicz, 1967; Sverdlin, 1967). Dzigan lost his economic independence and could no longer successfully battle the cultural policy that discriminated against him because he acted in Yiddish (Ohad, 1975).<sup>35</sup> With the help of Levi Eshkol, he succeeded, at the end of the 1960s, in receiving an exemption from the ‘spectacle tax’, and in 1978 – two years before his death at the age of 73 – then-Tel Aviv Mayor, Shlomo Lahat, granted him an exemption from the council tax (Shofti, 1978).

At the end of the 1970s, Dzigan again argued that satire had lost its influence. The change resulted from a weakening of his satire, but it also marked a shift in the status of Dzigan himself and in the status of Yiddish satire in the Israeli reality since the end of the 1960s. Dzigan expressed his despair and his lack of faith that the political parties would help find a solution for his declining personal status and that of Yiddish culture in general. Yiddish newspaper were also losing their influence (Rojanski, 2020, 250).<sup>36</sup>

In the last decade of his life, Dzigan found only rhetorical rather than practical solutions for this new reality. He lost his strength, or perhaps felt that his satirical weapon had become less penetrating. The discourse about Dzigan moved between satire and tragedy. From the beginning of the 1970s, Dzigan’s public expressions began to convey a feeling of frustration, even when this was not evident in his theatre. The statement that, had he been younger, he would have converted to Christianity and left Israel reflects deep exasperation with his inability to change not only the future but also the present, for both himself and his culture.

Likewise, the lack of writers and the poor quality of the texts were major themes in reviews of Dzigan’s shows, mainly since the second show that he staged alone. The texts in Dzigan’s performances aroused contradictory reaction. Yehoshua Bar-Yosef, for example, claimed that, from an artistic perspective, some of them were schmaltzy, but they achieved cultural admiration because they evoked memories of the Jewish shtetl, triggered nostalgia, and brought Jewish culture closer to the Israeli audience (1964). Bar-Yosef thus attributed to the texts an educational, didactic, and emotional role (1964). Repetition of materials from previous programs, skits that Dzigan himself had written, and the adaptation of classic materials, mainly by Sholem Aleichem, were immediate solutions, though Dzigan recognized the impossibility of creating a real continuation of the theatre in the tradition of Ararat and renewing the theatrical language in Israel (Keisari, 1965).

<sup>35</sup> As quoted in Ohad (1975): “Poland didn’t finish me off. Russia didn’t finish me of – but here, in the State of Israel, will the full stop be written? In the last three years in Israel I haven’t covered even 50 percent of my expenses”.

<sup>36</sup> *Letste Nayes* was still being published by the Mapai political party, which brought the newspaper to Tsanin, but in the words of Rojanski “the Yiddish press, the heart of the Yiddish cultural scene had shrunken dramatically” (2020, 250).

### 9. Yiddish kunst teater [Yiddish Art Theatre]

The year 1975 saw an important project in the history of Yiddish theatre in Israel, in part because of the new wave of immigration of Jews from the Soviet Union from 1969 through 1971, which brought new Yiddish actors and writers to the country. The *Yidish kunst teater* [Yiddish Art Theatre] was created with official support based on a Jewish Agency initiative, and supported by the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption and the Ministry of Education. In its own words, the theatre's goal was to make Israel a centre for Yiddish theatre, preserve the Yiddish language through the performance of classic Yiddish plays as well as translated plays from Hebrew, and attract new immigrant actors. The institution expected to give work to the new immigrants, helping them with their process of acclimation. One question raised about the idea of founding an art theatre in Yiddish in Israel was if the right artists were available and capable of developing such an enterprise. For the organizers and director Leah Porat,<sup>37</sup> this was a rhetorical question with a negative answer. Those in charge of the project looked for directors outside Israel. Dzigan harshly opposed the establishment of the *Yidish kunst teater*. He questioned the purity of the intentions behind this move, asking why they were choosing to bring artists from abroad to Israel rather than supporting those who were already active in Israel (Na'aman, 1975). In another interview, he said, "On the one hand, I welcome the fact that the Yiddish word and Yiddish cultural values have finally been remembered . . . but if the government and institutions have remembered the stepson and invested good money, why did they not bother to ensure a good play instead of a joke? Whoever wants to stage *Amkho* needs at least four real actors who were raised in the Jewish tradition" (Ohad, 1975).

The idea of founding such a repertory theatre in Yiddish was positive, but if we think about the institutions involved in this project, it is not hard to grasp that what seemed like a positive approach to Yiddish was just another step in the process of cultural translation. The *Yidish kunst teater* was an instrument in the cultural assimilation of new immigrants. There was no other reason for the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption and the Jewish Agency to be this project's major supporters. The intention was to give jobs to immigrant artists to help their transition to the Hebrew stage, as described in the press (Keisari, 1975).

The project was a colossal failure. We can learn about the approach to Yiddish culture by looking at the *mise en scène* style applied to their first

<sup>37</sup> Leah Porat was the director of the Yiddish *kunst-teater* as well as the director of the Art and Culture Department at the Ministry of Culture and Education.

performance. The director was Shmuel Bunim, the same director who brought a modern approach to Yiddish. He decided to begin and end all the scenes from Sholem Aleichem's play *Amkho* with a frozen image. Ben-Ami interpreted this artistic decision as a reflection of the actual states of affairs of Yiddish culture in Israel, i.e. that Yiddish was a frozen culture, a museological object (1975). To revive the Yiddish theatre, he said, it mustn't be presented as a museum, but be given a modern, contemporary approach without thinking that Yiddish theatre-goers are incapable of appreciating modernism. Ben-Ami was positive about the fact that the *Yidish kunst teater* was directed by figures from the Hebrew cultural milieu such as Leah Porat rather than by the 'last Mohicans' of Yiddish. He also saw the fact that the playbill was only in Hebrew as a good sign [!]. Like Ben-Ami, Arye Kinarti praised the fact that the first production was far from the popular style of the Yiddish theatre (1975). The performance was not a success, neither artistically nor in terms of the public. The second and last performance of *Glikl fun Hamel* was directed and performed by Ida Kaminska featuring Eni Liton, but it fared no better. Most of the critics concluded that there was no future for the Yiddish theatre, and what was even worse was that there was not even a present. This served to justify and legitimize the stance that there was no room to support a Yiddish art theatre in Israel.

Following the failure of the Yidish kunst teater and perhaps as a response to the World Conference of Yiddish and Yiddish Culture, which took place in Jerusalem in 1976, where participants expressed the necessity and willingness to found and develop a national art theatre in Yiddish, many critics felt free to be vehemently opposed to Yiddish theatre in Israel. Ze'ev Rav-Nof, a journalist in *Davar* defined the characteristics of Yiddish theatre as follows:

. . . commercial melodrama, whose basis is the shtetl, which has already disappeared . . . This material, which today is nothing more than nostalgia, becomes problematic when it is intended to be shown to the public. And not because of the low quality of the *mise en scène*, but because of the affinity of the limited Yiddish public for the modern amateur theatre.

(1976, 13)

Neve-Tsel defined Yiddish theatre as an agonizing art with the "quality of the final show of a school play, where the teacher has been ill during most of the rehearsals" (1976, 12-13). Its future, continued the journalist, was only to be "a grave between an endowed university chair and the archives of the academe." In the daily *Davar*, Brauda defined Yiddish theatre as "less than a cheap joke. 'Kitsch' would be an honourable adjective for many of these shows" (1978, 9).

In one of the longer essays on Yiddish theatre published in the 1970s, Tamar Maroz redefined Yiddish theatre using a sad, romantic image of nomadic actors, travelling the same night from one city to another to earn a living: the theatre companies without their own theatre buildings, without programs, performing shows in which the director often also plays stars as the hero (1974). Maroz wrote from an empathic and romantic place, helping the construction of a new image of the Yiddish theatre, a romantic and nostalgic image of something declining towards a poor, sad culture.

## 10. Yiddishpiel

Yiddishpiel – The Yiddish Theatre in Israel<sup>38</sup> was founded in Tel Aviv at the end of 1987 and it performed for the first time in January 1988. Its founder, initiator, first administrator, actor, artistic director, and most dominant figure was Shmulik Atzmon-Wircer, a well-known actor and director of the Hebrew stage.<sup>39</sup>

Atzmon was born 1929 in Biłgoraj, Poland, and immigrated to Israel when he was 17 years old. He started his career in the Hebrew theatre where he attempted to prove, according to his own words in a private interview, that “he was more *sabra* than the *sabras*”. He was one of the founders and directors of the avant-garde theatre Zaviv (f. 1958), which merged with Habima Theatre in 1968. In 1972, he directed Shimen Dzigan for the first time, forming an initial relationship with the Yiddish theatre. After the death of Eliyahu Goldenberg in 1976, Atzmon joined the theatre group founded at the beginning of the 1960s by Goldenberg, Shmuel Segal, and Shmuel Rodenski, who performed Sholem Aleykehm’s *Di kleyne mentshel-ekh* (in Hebrew) with great success (in 1970, it was broadcast on Israeli television). Atzmon joined Segal and Rodenski, whereupon the group was renamed *The Three Shmuliks*.

Since its founding, and with the support of the Tel Aviv Municipality, the Haseen Municipality in Germany, and the Lerner Fund for Yiddish (later on also with the support from different public and private institutions and the Israeli Ministry of Culture), Yiddishpiel presented more than 140 pieces from the ‘classic’ Yiddish theatre, pieces translated from Hebrew and other languages, and adaptations and translations of a few classics from the Western theatre, such as *Waiting for Godot*, a translated and adapted version of Beckett’s piece written and directed by Yehoshua Sobol in 2015 (Rotman, 2008). Many Yiddish stage actors, such as Yaakov Bodo, Yaakov Halperin,

<sup>38</sup> This became the official name of the theatre since 1994.

<sup>39</sup> According to some brochures of the theatre, the idea for the theatre originated with the then-Tel Aviv Mayor, Shlomo Lahat.

Anabella, Monica Vardimon, Carol Markovitz, and Israel Becker performed in the Yiddishpiel, together with young actors from the Hebrew theatre who previously didn't know Yiddish, such as Elena Yarlova, Gera Sandler, Irma Pisko, Anat Atzmon, and Gidi Yagil who became part of the troupe.

According to its own discourse, Yiddishpiel played on their cultural subgroup to which it belonged in order to help preserve a non-hegemonic culture in Israel. The institutional role of the theatre as expressed on its website in 2002 is "to preserve the tradition of the treasures of the Yiddish culture and the Yiddish language with the knowledge that this is an important part of the literary and cultural creation of our folk" ([www.yiddishpiel.co.il](http://www.yiddishpiel.co.il), accessed 2002). From this short passage, one may conclude that the institution was established not to renew the Yiddish tradition but to become a living museum for the Yiddish theatre and language. Yiddishpiel does not attempt to create new Yiddish theatre but to preserve (or even create) a canonical past. This approach has influenced the aesthetic of the theatre – an aesthetic of preservation – where the theatre has devoted itself to the preservation of a Yiddish aesthetic as understood by the theatre directors and managers. An inherent part of this process is to preserve itself, to survive (Caufman-Simchon, 2010; Shem-Tov, 2018).

Yiddishpiel has become a living memorial to the Yiddish theatre in Israel as understood by Atzmon, a role that can be largely accepted by the Israeli establishment and may be worthy of its support. But Yiddishpiel, mostly through Atzmon's public discourse in the press, has carried out a critical discourse against the Israeli cultural policy towards Yiddish in particular and diasporic cultures in general. Atzmon developed his discourse on the necessity of having a Yiddish theatre in Israel and on the local history of cultural discrimination suffered by the Yiddish theatre in Israel. On his personal bureau at the theatre offices, he keeps a framed reproduction of the letter from the Films and Plays Censorship Committee forbidding the Avrom Goldfaden Theatre to perform in Yiddish.

Yiddishpiel was founded at a time when Yiddish was no longer a cultural threat. This particular fact is referred to by Atzmon to justify the creation, development, and support of Yiddish theatre. Without diasporic cultures, Atzmon argues, there would be no Israeli culture: "There is no future without the past. . . . Without Yiddish culture, it would have been impossible to develop the theatre institution that Hanoch Levin created; all his writing was influenced by Yiddish" (quoted in Omer, 1991). The establishment of a Yiddish theatre was an urgent matter according to Atzmon. Yiddish theatre hasn't died yet, he told me in a private interview; perhaps it is only in its last throes of agony, so let's give the Yiddish theatre "a respectful death and not let it die like a dog" (Handelsatz, 1988; Manor, 1988; Pinkus, 1998).

Atzmon succeeded in his struggle to get official recognition for Yiddishpiel in particular, and for Yiddish theatre, language, and culture in general. He received economic support, important prizes, media attention, and invitations to international theatre festivals around the world. During its first 20 years of existence, Yiddishpiel was described by the Hebrew press as being at a low level, lacking artistic objectives or potential. The first production and those that followed got very negative reviews. The productions were defined as kitsch (Evron, 1988b and, 1989a; Nagid 1994); melodramatic (Evron, 1988b; Sachish, 1992; Handelzalts, 1989); naïve and amateur (Shifman, 1992; Handelzalts, 1994); nostalgic (Feingold, 1995; Nagid, 1995; Paz, 1989); with an old style (Evron, 1988b; Gilula, 1988); and other pejoratives. Sometimes the tone was very sarcastic and disrespectful towards the style, accusing the theatre of being grotesque (Bar-Yosef, 2001); out of time (Yaron, 1989); and with a very low artistic level, using very rude attributes such as *burekas* play (Evron, 1989b); primary school level (Burshteyn, 2000); or otherwise on a level of an amateur workshop. Michael Handelzalts, who was for many years the chief theatre critic at *Haaretz*, wrote very sarcastically about Yiddishpiel's first show, Sholem Aleikhem's *Shvertsu zayn a yid* [It is Hard to Be a Jew], directed by Israel Becker, which premiered on January 24, 1988: "When I left the theatre, I thought to myself that at least one good thing had come out of Zionism: it had made this type of theatre a thing of the past" (Handelzalts, 1988).

In the same article, Handelzalts described Yiddishpiel as a museological object and a historical reconstruction, rather than as art. In this sense, Yiddishpiel was seen as the continuation of the popular Yiddish commercial theatre – a theatre "from which an anti-Semite could derive pleasure" Boaz Evron wrote sarcastically (1988c). According to Handelzalts, Yiddishpiel justified the historically negative approach to Yiddish theatre in Israel (1988). "It is hard to understand," continued the reviewer, "what such a theatre has that justifies its revival" (1988). The reviews in the Hebrew press defined Yiddishpiel as a living monument not to the Yiddish art theatre that Atzmon dreamed about, but as a monument to the popular Yiddish theatre with all the negative stigma that dominated the Israel discourse.

Over time, some of the reviews became lighter and more empathetic. Specific performances got very positive reviews, like *Foygelman* [Birdman] (1991), based on a novel by Hebrew writer Aharon Meged, performed in Hebrew and Yiddish, directed by Yoram Falk. It was the first production that got positive reviews in the Hebrew press (Evron, 1991; Yaron 1991). This time, according to Handelzalts, the theatre justified its existence (1991). But these positive reviews were often exceptions, as the next productions got negative reviews again, followed by a few good reviews. Over the years, the theatre became part of the Israeli theatre landscape, though not part of



the mainstream: it is still considered to be an ethnic niche, a theatre from the Israeli sub-culture. To attract an audience, it has been forced to add sur-titles in Hebrew and Russian.

In 1996, the Israeli parliament approved the establishment of a National Authority for Yiddish Culture and a National Authority for Ladino Culture, and Atzmon was an important figure in the promotion of those laws, which would result in stable support for Yiddish culture. These institutions were finally established in 1999, and the National Authority for Yiddish Culture joined Beth Shalom Aleichem in becoming the two most important supporters of Yiddish culture in Israel. In 2011, Sassi Keshet, a singer and actor of the Hebrew stage who did not know Yiddish, became the new director of Yiddishpiel, a position he holds to this day. He has developed the theatre in a more popular direction, combining nostalgia and music in many of the programs in an attempt to win a broader audience once again. In 2012, Handelzalts still complained about the staging in Yiddish of a theatre piece of such low quality. Handelzalts referred to the repertoire and traditional Yiddish theatre. But, since the end of the 1990s, new approaches to Yiddish theatre and performance started to develop in Israel. These methods were looking for a contemporary approach to Yiddish. Some of those initiatives occurred in alternative venues such as Yung Yiddish founded by actor Mendy Cahan; other were avant-garde performances in Yiddish with Hebrew translations done by the Sala-manca Group, presented at the National Poetry Festival in Metula, the Jerusalem Film Festival, and the Israel Festival (Rotman, 2019; Stern, 2019); and, recently, Esther's Cabaret, supported by Sholem Aleichem House with new Yiddish texts written by Yaad Biran and Esther Nissim. The projects in which archive and repertoire, and past and present, are being challenged are the subject for another chapter in the history of Yiddish theatre and performance in Israel.

## 11. Conclusion

The analysis of the cultural and linguistic policy carried out by the State of Israel against the Yiddish theatre in the State of Israel in the studied period and its applications through different apparatuses such as the Films and Plays Censorship Committee and the taxation policies, as well as the close reading and analysis of the public discourse about the Yiddish theatre in Israel in the Hebrew and Yiddish press, demonstrate that these had a critical negative effect on the possible continuation or development of the Yiddish theatre in Israel. The effects of those policies and the negative rhetoric of the discourse, the economic oppression, and the rejection of the Yiddish theatre by theatre critics and the press impacted the public perception, af-

affected Yiddish artists economically, impelled Yiddish actors to try to find a way to the Hebrew theatre or towards new horizons. They also affected the decision of many important Yiddish artists not to immigrate to Israel, and instead prefer to work as guest artists or as permanent residents rather than as citizens. The Yiddish theatre in Israel became acceptable (only after a major struggle) more as a mean of remembering a forgotten culture than a living, creative field in the new-born state. The Yiddish theatre did not succeed in developing in Israel not only as consequence of the natural decline of the Yiddish culture and language after the Holocaust, but also as a consequence of an ideological policy that affected it directly. The Yiddish theatre was not persecuted because of its low degree of dominance, but rather because it was considered a linguistic and cultural threat, which was later translated into being an aesthetic threat. Those cultural policies were aimed at avoiding the possibility of performing an alternative idea of Jewishness that didn't fit the Hebrew Zionist ideology. Performing in Yiddish in Israel became - synonymous with performing in exile. Today, the Yiddish theatre in Israel finds itself between a museological project of remembrance and experimental, independent attempts to challenge this approach.

## Works Cited

- A. L. 1968. "Be'ayotav shel Dzigán". *Davar*, May 24.
- A. Y. 1958. "Dzigán un Shumacher – Af yidish oder hebreyish". *Letste naves*, December 5.
- ABA [Dzigán and Shumacher Archives at Beit Ariela Public Library in Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv]. File 164-04.
- File 146-04.
- File 141-04.
- Adar, T. 1986. "Hamaror sheme'ahorey hashmalts [The Bitterness Behind the Shmalts]", 7 Leylot, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, February 14.
- Adler, B. 1960. "Dzigán veShumacher – benifrad". *Hatzofe*, September 15.
- Aloni, A. 1984. "Hate'a'atron hayidi: sikum beynaim [Yiddish Theatre: A Synthesis]", 7 Leylot, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, October 5.
- Anonymous. 1957. "H'adashot 'omanut vetarbut". *Al hamishmar*, October 18.
- 1955a. "Dzigán veShumacher 'osim tse'ok". *Maariv*, March 2.
- 1955b. "H'atul sha'hor bein Dzigán veShumacher". *Hador*, June 30.
- 1954. "Regishut le hazkarat haflaya 'edatit [Sensibility to Remind Ethnic Discrimination]". *Haaretz*, January 21.
- 1950a. "Dzigán veShumacher be'ivrit". *Hador*, April 29.
- 1950b. "Yosef Bulov rotse levaker beYisra'el [Joseph Buloff Would like to Visit Israel]". *Yedioth Ahronoth*, March 17.
- Auslaender, Naḥum (Nokhem Oyslender). 1940. *Yidisher teater, 1887–1917*. Moscow: Der Emes.

- Avrahami, Yitzhak. 1955. "Dzigan veShumacher". *Zmanim*, May 5.
- Bar-Yosef, Yehoshua. 1964. "Nivror le'yidish mita yafa". *Yedioth Ahronoth*, February, 11.
- Bar-Yosef, Yosef. 2001. "Doqtor Kuni ve'rabi Lemel". *Hair*, October 4.
- Ben-Ami, Nakhman. 1975. "Tsa'ad rishon". *Maariv*, April 22.
- Ben-Meir, A. (Abba Ahimeir [Abba Shaul Geisinovich]). 1959. "'Makirim 'otkha dod' – tokhnit hadasha shel Dzigan veShumacher". *Herut*, May 22.
- 1958. "Dzigan veShumacher betokhnit hadasha". *Herut*, October 17.
- Berachia, Ts. 1952. "Hamahaze, hakahal, hamebaker vehakofer". *Davar*, September 17.
- Berkowitz, Joel, ed. 2008. *Yiddish Theatre: New Approaches*. Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization.
- Boyarin, Daniel. 1997. "Ta'alulanim, meqadshei Hashem ufaysanim – 'tasritim nistarim' umeyumanuiyot hahitnagdut shel haproza". *Te'orya ubikoret* 10: 145-62.
- Brauda, A. 1978. "Te'aatron yidish beYisra'el [Yiddish Theatre in Israel]". January 19.
- Bunim, Shmuel. 1994. *K'an bonim [Here we build]*. Tel Aviv: Dvir.
- Burshteyn, Dror. 2000. "Beyidish ze nishm'a yoter tov". *Kol Hair*, November 10.
- Carlebach, Azriel. 1950. "Dzigan veShumacher". *Maariv*, May 2.
- Caufman-Simchon, Sarit. 2010. "Lemale' halal: te'aatron besafa hamugravit beYisra'el". *Te'aatron* 30: 93-106.
- Ch-shin, N. 1952. "Der soyne shund". *Letste Naves*, January 18.
- Chaver, Yael. 2004. *What Must Be Forgotten*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Drucker Bar-Am, Gali. 2013. *'Ikh bin dayn shtoyb'? yitzug ha'havaya ha'yisra'el be'siporet yidish be'Yisra'el 1948-1968*. PhD dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
- Efrat. 1955. "Shnayim hamevi'im lanu tsehoq go'el". *Hador*, May 7.
- Efron, John M. 2012. "From Łódź to Tel Aviv: The Yiddish Political Satire of Shimen Dzigan". *Jewish Quarterly Review* 102 (Winter): 50-79.
- Evron, Boaz. 1991. "Me'orav lo' yerushalmi". *Yedioth Ahronoth*, October 8.
- 1989a. "Vekhol zot leshem ma?". *Yedioth Ahronoth*, February 11.
- 1989b. "Kitsch beyidish". *Yedioth Ahronoth*, April 12.
- 1988a. "Megilah lirit". *Yedioth Ahronoth*, October 6.
- 1988b. "Mutsag muze'oni". *Yedioth Ahronoth*, February 11.
- 1988c. "Mi tsarih et ze?". *Yedioth Ahronoth*, February 21.
- 1975. "Kol hashgyot haefshariot [All the Possible Mistakes]". *Yedioth Ahronoth*, May 8.
- Feuerstein, Emil. 1958. "'Eikh 'ta holekh". *Hatzofe*, November 7.
- 1957. "Tish'a qabin shel tsehoq". October 27.
- Feingold, Ben-Ami. 1995. "Omanim 'olim hadashim ne'evaqim al qiumam." Leilot Hashavu'a, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, December 11.
- 1965. "Tsehoq mi'tahat la'dem'ah". *Maariv*, June 24.
- Fishman, Joshua, ed. 1981. *A Thousand Years of Yiddish in Jewish Life and Letters*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Fishman, Joshua. 1991. *Yiddish Turning to Life*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Fishman, Sh. 1976. "Di yerushalaimer velt-konferents far yidisher kultur fun a sot-listishn kukvinkl". *Yidishe Shprakh* 35.

- Gan, Shimon. 1955. "Dzigan veShumacher be'ivrit". *'Omer*, October 14.
- Gash, Anthony. 1993. "Carnival and the Poetics of Reversal". In *New Directions in Theatre*, edited by Julian Hilton, 87-119. London: Palgrave.
- Gelbert, Stefan. 1958. "Bintivei satira 'aliza". *Al Hamishmar*, October 23.
- Gilula, Dvora. 1988. "Kasheh lir'ot te'aṭron yehudi". *Kol Hair*, March 11.
- Goldfinger, Arnon (director). 1999. *Hakomediantim*.
- Handelsatz, Michael. 2012. "Šaḥkaney safsal: hayidishpil ma'ale et safsal hazahav m'et Ron Clark". *Haaretz*, December 24.
- 1994. "Beyidish ze nishm'a harbe yoter garu'a". *Haaretz*, March 7.
- 1991. "Ish hatsiporim shel hayidish". *Haaretz*, October 10.
- 1989. "Yofi ze lo hakol". *Haaretz*, April 17.
- 1988. "Bishivchey hatsiount [In Praise of Zionism]". *Haaretz*, February 14.
- Har-Gil, Shraga. 1975. "Hakhelu hatsagot amkha beyidish". *Maariv*, April 7.
- Janasowicz, Isaac. 1967. "A shmues mit Shimen Dzigan". *Di prese* (Buenos Aires), December 27.
- Kedourie, Elie. 1994. "Nationalism and Self-Determination". In *Nationalism*, edited by John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, 49-55. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keisari, Uri. 1965. "Dzigan beli 'ipur". *Maariv*, May 10.
- Kinarti, Arye. 1975. "Te'aṭron memlakhti beyidish". *Davar*, March 23.
- Levin, B. 1960. "Teaters in Yisroel". *Der tog-morgn zhurnal*, December 23.
- M. 1950. "Hasivuv hasheni shel Dzigan veShumacher". *Maariv*, October 13.
- M. D. 1950. "Sodot shel tsenzorim". *Maariv*, January 31.
- Manger, Itzik, Jonas Turkow, and Moyshe Perenson, eds. 1968. *Yidisher teater in Eyrope tsvishn beyde velt-milkhomes*, vol. 1, *Poyln*. New York: Altveltlekher yidisher kultur kongres.
- Manor, Giora. 1988. "Al shimurim veshmarim". *Al Hamishmar*, February 19.
- Maroz, Tamar. 1974. "Banim ḥorgim late'aṭron". *Musaf Haaretz*, *Haaretz*, June 28.
- Mayzel, Nakhmen. 1933. "Mikoyekh dem shund roman". *Literarische bleter* (Warsaw) 10, November 10.
- Mlotek, Y. 1995. "Vi azoy kukt af yidish di yidishe inteligents". *Lebns-fragn*, May-June.
- Na'aman, Idit. 1975. "'Ayin aḥat bokha, 'ayin aḥat tsoḥeket". *Yedioth Ahronoth*, April 17.
- Nagid, Haim. 1995. "Freilekh bemuze'on hashe'ava". *Davar Rishon*, December 11.
- 1994. "Naflu beshebi hakitsch". *Davar*, March 6.
- Nahor, Asher. 1958. "LeDzigan veShumacher holekh". *Yedioth Ahronoth*, October 9.
- 1955. "Dzigan veShumacher ve[ha]humor [ha]yiśra'eli". *Herut*, October 14.
- 1953. "'Erev 'im Dzigan veShumacher". *Herut*, September 1.
- Nayman, Y. M. 1955. "Dzigan veShumacher: lehofa'atam ba'arets".
- Neve-Tsel, A. 1976. "Yidish le'o kadish [Yiddish Without Kadish]". *Mossaf Haaretz*, *Haaretz*, September 3.
- Ohad, Mikhael. 1975. "'Eifo sheva' parotai hashmenot?" *Haaretz*, April 4.
- Omer, G. 1991. "Mekapkhim et hamizrakhim me'eyropa". *Tzfon Hair*, September 13.
- Paz, M. 1989. "Melodrama pashtanit". *Davar*, April 13.
- Pilowsky, Aryeh Leyb. 1986. *Tsvishn yo un neyn: Yidish un yidish-literatur in*

- Erets-Yisroel, 1907–1948* [Yiddish: Between Yes and No, Yiddish and Yiddish Literature in Eretz Israel 1907–1948]. Tel-Aviv: Veltrat far Yidish un Yidisher Kultur.
- Pinkus, Irmi. 1998. “Timḥeki ’oti”. *Hair*, March 6.
- Quint, Alyssa. 2019. *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- R-N, Ts. 1951. “Yidische aktiorn un poyltseyishe protokoln [Yiddish Actors and Police Protocols]”. *Letste Nayes*, April 6.
- Rav-Nof, Ze’ev. 1976. “Kl’asika yiidit be’eydan haḥaltura [Yiddish Classics in the era of the *Chaltura*-Amateur Theatre]”, October 24.
- Raz-Krakotzkin, Amnon. 1994. “Exile in the Midst of Sovereignty: A Critique of ‘Shlilat HaGalut’ in Israeli Culture II”. *Theory and Criticism* (in Hebrew) 5: 113–32.
- Rimon, Yitzhok. 1967. “Dzigans uffirung ‘Sholem-Aleichem yidn’ gezt shoyen khadoshim-lang in Yisroel mit a groysn derfolg”. *Di prese* (Buenos Aires), February 14.
- Rojanski, Rachel. 2020. *Yiddish in Israel: A History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Rotman, Diego. 2021. *The Yiddish Stage as a Temporary Home: The Theatre of Dzigana and Shumacher (1927-1980)*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- 2019. “Danzando con los muertos posesión y nacionalismo en el film performance *Der Dibuk 1937 2017*”. In *El Dibuk entre dos mundos*, edited by Susana Skura and Melina Di Miro, 177-198. San Salvador de Jujuy: Universidad Nacional de Jujuy.
- 2008. “Yidishpil teater tsvishn uflebung un geshtaltikung 1988-2003 [Yiddishpiel Theatre Between Revival and Paralysis 1988-2003]”. *Yerusholaymer Almanakh* 28: 323-45.
- 2007. “Te’atron Yidish be’Yiśra’el [Yiddish Theatre in Israel]. *Zmanim* 99: 38-45.
- 2004. *Yidish teater in medines-Yisroel – tsu der retorisher konstruksye funem yidish teater in an eynshprakhikn kultur-milye 1948-2003* [Yiddish Theatre in the State of Israel – Towards the construction of Yiddish Theatre in a Monolingual Cultural Milieu]. M.A. Thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
- Sachish, Yaron. 1992. “Kazeh kaṭan vekvar ṭurki?” *Iton Yerushalaim*, September 4.
- Sadan, Dov. 1984. “Hamakhlokes un ir videranander”. In *Midresh Yitshik*, I. Manger, 27-46. Jerusalem: Magnes.
- Safran, William. 1992. “Language, Ideology, and State-Building: A Comparison of Policies in France, Israel, and the Soviet Union”. *International Political Science Review* 13: 397-414.
- Sandrow, Nahma. 1977. *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theatre*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Shaked, Gershon. 2004. “Modern Midrash: The Biblical Canon and Modern Literature”. *AJS Review* 28(1): 43-62.
- Shapira, Anita. 2004. “Whatever Became of ‘Negating Exile?’” In *Israeli Identity in Transition*, edited Anita Shapira. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Shatzky, Jacob, ed. 1930. *Arkhib far der geshikhte fun yidishn teater un drame*, vol. 1. Vilna and New York: YIWO.

- Shem-Tov, Naphtaly. 2018. "Displaying the Mizrahi Identity in Autobiographical Performances: Body, Food, and Documents". *New Theatre Quarterly* 34(2): 160-75.
- Shifman, Y. 1992. "Bu'at zman". *Davar, Yedioth Ahronoth*, September 18.
- Shin. 1962. "Te'atron yidish - 'esek meshagsheg". *Yedioth Ahronoth*, January 30.
- Shmulevitsh, Y. 1968. "Komiker Shimen Dzigan vet shpilm in Nyu-York". *Forverts*, October 3.
- Shofti, Shimshon. 1978. "Kol 'od neshama be'api - shahek 'asahek". *Al hamishmar*, June 23.
- Shtern, Yisroel. 1937. "Dos bisele shund zol gornisht untergeyn". *Literarishe bleter* (Warsaw) 4, October 29.
- State Archives. File gimel-5549-07.  
 – File gimel-3577/70.  
 – File gimel- 3577/12.  
 – File gimel-1091-39.
- Stern, Zehavit. 2019. "Dubbing the Dead: Der Dybbuk 1937–2017 at the Jerusalem YMCA Hall". *TDR: The Drama Review* 63(2): 158-66.  
 – 2011. *From Jester to Gesture: Eastern European Jewish Culture and the Re-imagination of Folk Performance*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.
- Sverdlin, G. 1967. "Shimen Dzigan farlirt 35000 tsushoyer". *Der tog-morgn zhurnal* (New York), April 6.
- Tsanin, Mordkhe (Mordechai) (Ts. R-n). 1951. "Yidishe aktiorn un politseyishe protokoln". *Letste Nayes*, April 6.
- Turkow, Jonas. 1938. "A mageyfe vos ruft zikh shund". *Literarishe bleter* (Warsaw) 15, January 7.
- Yaron, Eliakim. 1991. "Bein hakisa'ot". *Maariv Calcala, Maariv*, October 8.  
 – 1989. "A sheyne melodrama". *Maariv*, April 12.
- Yas, A. 1988. "Nikhnas arak yats'a megilah". *Maariv Pnai, Maariv*, August 26.
- Yerushalmi, Dorit. 2005. "Between Weaving and Unravelling: Shmuel Bunim Directs Itzik Manger". *Iggud: Selected Essays in Jewish Studies* 3 (Languages, Literatures, Arts): 333-52.
- Yiddishpiel*. [www.yiddishpiel.co.il](http://www.yiddishpiel.co.il) (Accessed September 16, 2002).
- Zerubavel, Yael. 2008. "Memory, the Rebirth of the Native, and the 'Hebrew Bedouin' Identity". *Social Research* 75(1): 315-52.
- Zonder, Y. 1950. "Tsehok 'o hozek?" *Hador*, December 3.
- Zylbercweig (Zilbertsvayg), Zalmen. 1931-1969. *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, 6 vols. New York, Warsaw, and Mexico City: Elisheva.





DAVID LUCKING\*

## **Stony Limits and Envious Walls: Metamorphosing Ovid in *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream***

Abstract

This paper examines the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, which entered the European literary tradition by way of the fourth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as it informs *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The discussion of the manner in which Ovid's tragic tale haunts these Shakespearean works involves a consideration of the specular relation existing between the two plays that, among other things, also helps to explain some of the apparently anomalous elements in each. Attention is given to the manner in which Shakespeare's works reflect the influence not only of the Ovidian original but of the different versions of the tale elaborated by Chaucer and Golding, and in particular to the emblematic image of the wall which, variously developed by his predecessors, plays a crucial role in both of Shakespeare's plays.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; Ovid; Chaucer; Golding; *Metamorphoses*; *Romeo and Juliet*; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

### 1.

It sometimes happens that what might be classified merely as sources for Shakespeare's plays are in fact invoked so pointedly by the works themselves as effectively to constitute implicit intertexts in relation to which, in greater or lesser measure, the dramas deriving from them define their imaginative coordinates and elaborate their own meanings. In such instances the sources may be viewed not solely in genealogical terms as historical antecedents or creative influences only, but as elements operating actively within the text and functioning as essential components of its overall structure of significance. Such is the case with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and more particularly with the story of Pyramus and Thisbe contained within that rich and variegated compendium of mythological narratives, as they relate to two plays which are generally recognized to be closely affiliated with and even complementary to one another, these being *Romeo and*

\* University of Salento, Lecce – david.lucking@unisalento.it

*Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.<sup>1</sup> It is some of the ways in which this story makes its presence felt in these two works, and the web of relationships that is thereby woven between them – a skein of reciprocal allusion which is perhaps denser and more intricate than might appear at first sight – that it will be my purpose to examine in the following pages.

Even at the level of plot, the analogies between Ovid's story and the two Shakespearean plays are striking. The tale concerns two young people, living in adjoining dwellings in the city of Babylon, whose burgeoning love for one another is impeded by the opposition of their parents. In Ovid it is not specified that there is any actual antagonism between the families of the two lovers, and neither is any other reason given for the fact that they are not permitted to marry, but nonetheless the parents are adamant in their refusal to consent to a union between their children. Notwithstanding this opposition, however, the two young people contrive to hold whispered conversations with one another through a narrow crack in the wall separating their two houses, and one day arrange a nocturnal tryst near the tomb of Ninus situated outside the city. Thisbe is the first to arrive at the assignation, but is forced to conceal herself when a lioness appears on the scene with her mouth dripping with blood from a recent kill. In the haste of her flight she drops her mantle,<sup>2</sup> and the lioness rends this garment and smears it with blood before vanishing. Pyramus arrives, sees the tracks of the lioness and the torn and bloodied mantle, and infers from this evidence that Thisbe has been devoured by a wild beast while awaiting him. Overwhelmed by despair, he stabs himself with his sword, and Thisbe, emerging from her hiding place in time to see her lover die, also dispatches herself by means of the same weapon.

Numerous commentators have pointed out the relevance of this tragic little tale to that of *Romeo and Juliet*. Kenneth Muir mentions that even before the composition of Shakespeare's tragedy the resemblance between

<sup>1</sup> Frank Kermode describes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as "a twin of *Romeo and Juliet*, a treatment of what is fundamentally the same story but this time in a comic mode" (2001, 59), while Brian Gibbons observes that the two plays constitute "a kind of diptych, portraying the attraction and repulsion of opposites . . . in opposed modes, of tragedy and comedy" (1993, 31). Other critics have remarked on the specular relation between the two plays.

<sup>2</sup> This is Arthur Golding's translation of Ovid's "*amicus*" (Ovid 2000, 89), which Shakespeare also adopts in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (5.1.271). Others translate the word as "cloak" (e.g. Frank Justus Miller in Ovid 1977, 185, 187), and Chaucer renders it as "wimpel" (1969, 370). If, as some commentators argue, a sexual significance is to be read into the bloodying of the garment (Taylor 2004, 56), then "veil" might be the more adequate translation, one that would chime with Ovid's use of the word "*velamina*" on two occasions in the story (Ovid 1977, 184, 186). See A.B. Taylor's note in Taylor 2004, 64, note 16.

the stories had been noticed by George Pettie, whose *Petite Pallace of Pettie his Pleasure* was published in 1576 or shortly thereafter, and so might conceivably have been read by Shakespeare himself. Muir quotes Pettie's observation "that sutch presinesse of parentes brought *Pyramus and Thisbe* to a wofull end, *Romeo and Julietta* to untimely death" (2005, 68). Other critics have gone even further, and argued not only for an analogy but for an actual genealogical connection between Shakespeare's work and its Ovidian predecessor. One editor of *Romeo and Juliet*, Brian Gibbons, discussing the version by Luigi Da Porto which influenced Matteo Bandello and through him Arthur Brooke's *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* – the poem which is the most obvious immediate source of Shakespeare's play – suggests that Da Porto's "ending ... may be influenced by the story of Pyramus and Thisbe in Ovid" (1993, 35), and that it is by this route that the tale found its way into *Romeo and Juliet*. But the theory has a long lineage, and is one that has not failed to provoke its fair share of dissent. If in the nineteenth century the pioneering student of folklore Thomas Keightley asserted that "the remote original is the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, from which an Italian writer named Luigi da Porto made a tale" (1867, 32), the editor of Brooke's *Romeus and Juliet* J.J. Munro specifically takes issue with the view that Pyramus and Thisbe is the "ultimate source of the Romeo legend", remarking that "this theory of absolute relationship with one ancient story is hardly tenable ... and the fact that the simple theme of two distressed lovers would call forth the same type of story in different minds, may explain some of the similarity" (1908, x). Munro's objection raises an important point concerning the methodology of source studies, the fact that the existence of an analogy does not necessarily imply that of a relation of direct influence. What tells against his rather perfunctory dismissal of the Pyramus and Thisbe story as a source, however, is the fact that Shakespeare himself calls attention to it, both obliquely in *Romeo and Juliet*, and more directly in that other play which might in various respects be seen as a kind of pendant to this tragedy, namely *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Keightley is of course simplifying drastically when he asserts that Da Porto elaborated his tale from the original in the Pyramus and Thisbe episode, because the evolutionary trajectory of the story was considerably more convoluted than this. Nonetheless the idea that this episode lies in the background of *Romeo and Juliet*, as it self-evidently does in that of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as well, remains entirely valid.

Before going any further a qualification must be registered. To affirm that Pyramus and Thisbe story in the *Metamorphoses* constitutes an "ultimate source", to use Munro's phrase, or even a "remote original", to use Keightley's, is of course a gross simplification, because Ovid's tale is it-

self almost certainly an elaboration of an antecedent narrative, reshaped to conform to the pattern of ceaseless metamorphosis which the Roman poet perceived as operating throughout the cosmos. According to Peter E. Knox, although “the story of Pyramus and Thisbe ... is known from no extant literary sources earlier than Ovid ... he must have found it in some text now lost”, the tale seeming to have descended from a myth originating in the Greek East (2014, 38). Knox elsewhere discusses a mosaic located in the remains of a second or third century A.D. villa on Cyprus, depicting the story of Pyramus and Thisbe but appearing to refer to another tradition than the Ovidian, and suggests that this work “opens the possibility that Ovid learned of a local Cilician myth which he adapted to his own purposes” (1989, 328). According to this reconstruction, in other words, Ovid himself is no more than another link in a chain of transmission by which a story of originally Eastern provenance, apparently featuring deities associated with a river and a stream (Knox 1989, 319; Keith 2001, 309), entered into the European tradition. Since the Ovidian version of the Pyramus and Thisbe narrative is in chronological terms the earliest literary exemplification of the story that has actually come down to us, however, and as it is the earliest with which Shakespeare himself may reasonably be supposed to have been acquainted, it is this version that we must take as a point of reference.

There can be no question that Shakespeare knew Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* extremely well, both in the original Latin and in the translation that had been published in 1567 by Arthur Golding, and that echoes of these works reverberate throughout his own.<sup>3</sup> That one of the Ovidian stories which particularly caught Shakespeare’s attention was that of Pyramus and Thisbe is evidenced by the fact that he specifically alludes to it in several of his plays. The *Metamorphoses* is not, of course, the only literary work in which he could have read this story, although he would have known very well that it is the Roman poem which is its *locus classicus*. John Gower offered a version of the tale in his *Confessio Amantis*, a poem which Shakespeare consulted when writing his portions of *Pericles*, and there are a number of others.<sup>4</sup> Among these is the rendition, entitled “The Legend of Thisbe of Babylon”, included in Chaucer’s *The Legend of Good Women*, a curious collection of stories in which the author ostensibly seeks to vindicate the su-

<sup>3</sup> For Shakespeare’s debt to Ovid, see for instance Highet 1985, 203-7, Taylor 2000, Bate 2000, and Bate 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Muir provides an extensive survey of some of the versions of the Pyramus tale extant in Shakespeare’s time and, arguing that “Shakespeare had read several versions of the Pyramus story” (1954, 142), identifies a number of possible verbal borrowings from these sources to be found in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. A revised version of this discussion is to be found in Muir’s later book *The Sources of Shakespeare’s Plays* (2005, 68-77).

perior moral qualities of women, but does so with a satirical glint in his eye that may have given Shakespeare a cue for his own treatment of the tale in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As is the case with other stories contained in this collection, Chaucer explicitly cites Ovid (whom he identifies as Naso) as his fount of information (1969, 368), though he takes significant liberties with his source when it suits his purposes. Although so eminent an authority in matters pertaining to Shakespearean sources as Kenneth Muir maintains that in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* "Shakespeare took very little from Chaucer's version of the story, the only one which was not in some way ludicrous" (2005, 72), it seems to me that, as I shall be arguing as we proceed, Chaucer's retelling of the tale may in fact have exerted a significant influence not only on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* but on *Romeo and Juliet* as well, and that this influence may help to account for some of the apparently anomalous elements to be found in each.

Although explicit references to the story of Pyramus and Thisbe in Shakespeare's works are relatively few, they are not the less telling for that reason. A particularly vivid instance is found in *Titus Andronicus*, in which we find the lines "So pale did shine the moon on Pyramus / When he by night lay bathed in maiden blood" (2.3.231-2).<sup>5</sup> Examined from the perspective of the present discussion, the tableau thus evoked of the moon casting its pallid glow over the lifeless bodies of the unfortunate lovers is of particular interest, inasmuch as the detail of the moon illuminating the scene on the night of the tragic tryst between Pyramus and Thisbe is one that is mentioned only in passing by Golding, whereas Chaucer draws deliberate attention to it when he remarks that "The mone shoon, men mighte wel y-see" (1969, 370). This is a circumstance that becomes significant in view of the anxiety evinced by the artisans enacting the Pyramus and Thisbe interlude in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that ways and means be found "to bring the moonlight into a chamber; for you know, Pyramus and Thisby meet by moonlight" (3.1.46-7), since it suggests that Shakespeare is at this point thinking of Chaucer's retelling of Ovid at least as much as of Golding's translation. In *Titus Andronicus*, incidentally, a drama in which a volume of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* physically materializes on the stage and plays a crucial role in advancing the action, several of the personages not only purposely model their conduct on stories found in the *Metamorphoses*, but oblige other characters to do the same, so that in

<sup>5</sup> With the exception of those to *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, all references to Shakespeare's works throughout this article are to the single volume *Arden Shakespeare Complete Works* (Shakespeare 2001). References to *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are to the editions of the play edited by Brian Gibbons and Harold F. Brooks respectively (Shakespeare 1997; Shakespeare 2006).

this case there is inevitably and demonstrably a correspondence between events in the drama and the Ovidian source.<sup>6</sup> This is something that might, though in less overt form, constitute a precedent for later works as well.

Another mention of the Pyramus and Thisbe story is to be found in *The Merchant of Venice*, when Jessica, reviewing the sad catalogue of love affairs terminating in disaster or betrayal that may be premonitory of her own future life with Lorenzo, recalls that “In such a night / Did Thisbe fearfully o’ertrip the dew, / And saw the lion’s shadow ere himself, / And ran dismayed away” (5.1.6-9). In this case as well the story of the Babylonian lovers is invoked, together with others that are also to be found in Chaucer’s works, as a prototype of doomed love. What from the point of view of the present discussion is perhaps more immediately pertinent, however, is the fact that the tale is expressly alluded to in *Romeo and Juliet*, when Mercutio mockingly remarks that in comparison with Rosaline, with whom Romeo believes himself to be in love, “Thisbe [is] a grey eye or so, but not to the purpose” (2.4.43-4). These are words that may be construed as an intentional hint on Shakespeare’s part, signalling the existence of an imaginative link between this play and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. For it is of course in this latter work, written about the same time as *Romeo and Juliet* and sharing some of its themes and image patterns, that the Pyramus and Thisbe story is most deliberately invoked, much of the play revolving in fact around the preparations being mounted by a group of Athenian artisans to present a theatrical rendition of the tale at a wedding feast.

## 2.

I have mentioned the fact that Shakespeare was familiar with Golding’s translation of Ovid, as is amply attested by the numerous echoes of Golding’s words to be found in his works.<sup>7</sup> And a number of commentators, including myself, have argued that this translation is explicitly referenced,

<sup>6</sup> For more on this see for instance Waith 1957, West 1982, Hunt 1988, Hardy 1997, Maslen 2000, and Lucking 2012, 43-61. Janice Valls-Russell considers the question of whether the figure of Bassianus in *Titus Andronicus* might be modelled on that of Ovid’s Pyramus in 2010, 75.

<sup>7</sup> Most notably, perhaps, he draws upon Golding’s version as well as upon the original text in Prospero’s valediction to his magic in the final act of *The Tempest* (5.1.33-50). For discussions of how elements of both the original work and its translation are blended in this passage, see Muir 2005, 3-4, and Bate 2000, xlii. For examples from the Sonnets and elsewhere of passages “transmuted from Ovid through the Golding translation”, see Hight 1985, 204-7, this quotation from page 205.



and in some measure also parodied, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.<sup>8</sup> But, as I have already suggested, there is reason to believe that Chaucer's retelling of Ovid's story in *The Legend of Good Women* also contains elements that may have influenced Shakespeare, and that this influence extends to *Romeo and Juliet* as well. First of all, there is a certain analogy between the ways the stories of doomed passion are introduced in "The Legend of Thisbe of Babylon" and *Romeo and Juliet* respectively. Chaucer's tale begins with the words:

At Babiloine whylom fil it thus,  
 The whiche toun the queen Semiramus  
 Leet dichen al about, and walles make  
 Ful hye, of harde tyles wel y-bake.  
 Ther weren dwellinge in this noble toun  
 Two lordes, which that were of greet renoun.  
 (1969, 368)

This may be compared with the opening lines of the Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*: "Two households both alike in dignity / (In fair Verona where we lay our scene)" (1-2). Both works begin with a specification of the name of the town where the drama is enacted, and both mention two families residing within that town which enjoy elevated social status, before proceeding to depict the plight of their respective children whose love is thwarted by the familial influences to which they are subject. This expository strategy, proceeding from the general to the specific, is very different from that of Golding, who like Ovid himself does not expressly identify the town by name in his exordium, and who instead of mentioning the parental figures at the outset immediately focuses on the "two yong folke" who are "in houses joynde so nere / That under all one roofe well nie both twaine conveyed were" (Ovid 2000, 88).<sup>9</sup> For the sake of comparison with Shakespeare's more immediate, and more generally acknowledged, source in *Romeus and Juliet*, it might be mentioned that Brooke also begins with an invocation of the name of the town: "There is beyond the Alps, a town of ancient fame, / Whose bright renown yet shineth clear: Verona men it name" (1908, 1). But it is not until line 25 that he gets around to mention-

<sup>8</sup> See for instance Forey 1998, Willson 1969, and Lucking 2011. Muir points out that the references in Quince's Pyramus and Thisbe playlet to Thisbe's "mantle", and to the "cranny" in the wall separating the lovers, seem to derive from Golding (2005, 69).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the opening of the tale in the *Metamorphoses*: *Pyramus et Thisbe, iuvenum pulcherrimus alter, / altera, quas Oriens habuit, praelata puellis, / contiguas tenuere domos, ubi dicitur altam / coctilibus muris cinxisse Semiramis urbem. / notitiam primosque gradus vicinia fecit, / tempore crevit amor; taedae quoque iure coissent, / sed vetuere patres: quod non potuere vetare, / ex aequo captis ardebant mentibus ambo.* (Ovid 1977, 182)



ing the two rival households: "There were two ancient stocks, which Fortune high did / Above the rest, indued with wealth, and nobler of their race . . . Whose praise, with equal blast, Fame in her trumpet blew" (2). If it is true as Munro argues that Brooke wrote *Romeus and Juliet* with Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* in mind (1908, lii-liv), it seems no less likely that Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* as much under the influence of *The Legend of Good Women* as of Brooke's poem.

There are other interesting points of contact between *Romeo and Juliet* and Ovid's story of Pyramus and Thisbe, some of which may betray processes of association operating in Shakespeare's mind. One such convergence may be found in the rather odd image Capulet uses to describe Juliet's profuse weeping, which he mistakenly imputes to her grief at her cousin Tybalt's death: "How now, a conduit, girl?" (3.5.129). As it happens, there are only seven instances of the word "conduit" in Shakespeare's plays, and one in *The Rape of Lucrece*, and in the majority of these cases the use of the word is literal, referring to the channels or pipes through which water or other fluids are conveyed. Strictly speaking, the image of a conduit is not entirely felicitous as applied to Juliet's weeping, and only really makes sense if Capulet is supposed to be imagining his daughter's eyes as being the spouts from which the contents of a pipe are discharged, as is the case when Antigonus in *The Winter's Tale* describes a figure in a dream whose "eyes / Became two spouts" under the stress of an emotion (3.3.25-6). Comparison might be made however with the phrase "As from a conduit with three issuing spouts", used by Marcus to describe Lavinia's blood pouring from her wounds in *Titus Andronicus* (2.4.30), a simile which, as has several times been noted, recalls Ovid's equally graphic description of Pyramus's death in the *Metamorphoses*.<sup>10</sup> It has been suggested that Shakespeare might have borrowed Capulet's image from Brooke's poem, in which Juliet assures her mother at one point that "my painéd heart by conduits of the eyne / No more henceforth, as wont it was, shall gush forth dropping brine" (Shakespeare 1993, 190 n.; Brooke 1908, 67). This might well be so, but it seems likely as well that the playwright is once again remembering Golding's Ovid, in which the following rather bizarre comparison is used to describe the force with which Pyramus's blood spurts from his body after he has stabbed himself with his sword:

As when a Conduite pipe is crackt, the water bursting out  
Doth shote it self a great way off and pierce the Ayre about.  
(Ovid 2000, 148-9)

<sup>10</sup> Waith 1957, 47. See also Bate's note in his edition of *Titus Andronicus* (Shakespeare 1995, 188 n.). Bate goes on to point out the "Ovidianism of the whole of [the] speech" in which these lines are found, something he also comments on in 2001, 111-12.

And he may also be recalling the story of Thisbe in *The Legend of Good Women*, in which Chaucer employs the identical image: “The blood out of the wounde as brode sterte / As water, whan the conduit broken is” (1969, 370). What is to be noted is that whereas Ovid invokes the image of a broken conduit to describe how Pyramus’s blood sprays a nearby mulberry tree and transforms the colour of its fruit from white to deep purple, this being the metamorphosis he specifically has in mind in this story, and whereas Golding follows suit in his translation of the tale, Chaucer dispenses with these gory details and therefore has no need of so vivid an image as that of a fractured pipe streaming forth water. Yet he too renders Ovid’s phrase “*fistula plumbo*” (1977, 186) as “conduit”, and this may help to explain why, though in a very different context, it appears in *Romeo and Juliet* as well.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.

It would perhaps not be too much of an exaggeration to suggest that the image of water gushing from a broken conduit, which I have argued may plausibly have been carried over to *Romeo and Juliet* from Golding and Chaucer, may bear some imaginative relation to the situation whereby the passion of two young people bursts the constraints imposed upon them by their elders, though only at the cost of the death of the lovers.<sup>12</sup> If this is so, then it is closely bound up with another element found in both *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* which can be related to Ovid’s tale of Pyramus and Thisbe. This, unpromising as it might seem at first glance, is the image of the wall. We have seen that in the Pyramus and Thisbe story, as it is narrated in Ovid, and retold by Chaucer and by Golding, a detail that assumes particular importance is that of the partition dividing two dwellings which, interposing itself physically as a barrier between the young lovers, also emblemizes the social impediments standing in the way of their union. Something that is worth observing in this con-

<sup>11</sup> It should perhaps be mentioned that the image of blood issuing from the spouts of wounds does not invariably evoke the word “conduit” in Shakespeare’s mind. In *Julius Caesar* Calpurnia dreams of a statue of her husband “Which like a fountain with an hundred spouts / Did run pure blood”, an image which Decius Brutus recalls in his reference to the statue “spouting blood in many pipes” (2.2.77-8, 85).

<sup>12</sup> It might be noted that *Antony and Cleopatra* contains numerous instances of the image of passion as something that “overflows the measure” (1.1.2) and generally breaks the trammels of a culturally imposed discipline. For an interesting account of the metaphorical schema recurrent in this play based on the image of a container unable to hold the “liquids of passionate love, martial courage, and grief”, see Freeman 1999, this quotation from page 446.

nection is that the wall motif is in fact introduced from the very beginning of Ovid's story, when the city walls encircling Babylon are described in a manner that might reveal symbolic associations in the mind of the Roman author himself. Following in Ovid's footsteps, Chaucer relates that Semiramus [sic] had constructed around the city "walles . . . Ful hye, of harde ty-les wel y-bake" (1969, 368), while Golding describes the town, not entirely elegantly, as a place "of whose huge walles so monstrous high and thicke / The fame is given Semyramis for making them of bricke" (Ovid 2000, 88). It seems reasonable to suggest that it is these massive and presumably impregnable walls, demarcating the perimeter of the town and isolating it from what Chaucer describes as the "the felde . . . so brode and wyde" (1969, 369), that appear again in microcosmic form in the partition separating the dwellings inhabited by Pyramus and Thisbe. The implication would seem to be that the wall which delineates the boundaries of the town as an urban entity also defines the contours of the social and interpersonal relations existing within its precincts, including the prohibition upon the two young people's love imposed by their parents. This wall, which figures what Giuseppe Mazzotta describes as "the proximity and separation to which the two young lovers are doomed" (1986, 155), is riven however by a narrow fissure that permits the lovers to exchange furtive whispers with one another, and it is through this crack that they make their pact to escape beyond the boundaries of the city and so abandon the world of walls altogether. Ironically, however, the place they choose for their assignation is a tomb and therefore associated with death, as Mazzotta also points out:

This is, in effect, the double focus of the romance: they live contiguously but are barred by a wall their houses have in common; their nearness engenders love, but they are kept apart by their parents' prohibition; through the chink in the wall each of them throws kisses that can never reach the other side. Yet, impelled by desire, the two agree to elope at night and choose Ninus' tomb as their meeting place. The irony is transparent, for as they name Ninus' tomb the lovers unwittingly make the place of death the point of destination of their desire.  
(1986, 155)

Now as it happens the image of the wall is prominent in both *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. These are in fact the two plays in the Shakespearean canon with the highest incidence of the word "wall" in the singular form, there being, not counting scene directions and speech-headings, no fewer than twenty-nine occurrences in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and eight in *Romeo and Juliet*. Except for *Edward III*, which is only Shakespearean in part, no other play contains more than three instances of the word. Although the word "wall" is not explicitly used in

this connection, Romeo effectively breaches the confines of the Capulet residence when he irrupts into the feast being held there, and this trespass overtly implicates walls and what they emblemize in what follows. It may be inferred from the text itself that the second act of *Romeo and Juliet* opens in a street flanking the wall of Capulet's orchard, since Benvolio obligingly supplies the information that Romeo "ran this way and leapt this orchard wall" (2.1.5), and the idea is pursued in the ensuing scene. Asked how he managed to enter her father's garden, since "The orchard walls are high and hard to climb" (2.2.63), Romeo poetically if somewhat implausibly responds that "With love's light wings did I o'erperch these walls, / For stony limits cannot hold love out" (2.2.66-7), to which he adds that he was directed in these exertions by love which "lent me counsel, and I lent him eyes" (2.2.81). This latter declaration implicitly alludes to the commonplace that love is blind, but it is also tempting to perceive in it yet another reminiscence of the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, in which it appears that love, far from being sightless, is endowed with an acuity of vision peculiar to itself. In his version of the story Chaucer observes that although the cleft in the wall dividing the houses of the two young lovers is so narrow as almost to be invisible, "what is that, that love can nat espy?" (1969, 369), while in his rendition of the *Metamorphoses* Golding translates Ovid's question "*quid non sentit amor?*" (1977, 182) as "what doth not love espie?" (Ovid 2000, 88). The resemblance between these two formulations of the idea that lovers' eyes have the power to detect the least vulnerability in the barriers standing between them, incidentally, is so close as to suggest that Golding too was familiar with Chaucer's tale and might have been influenced by it.

There are a number of other references to walls in *Romeo and Juliet* that could lend themselves to extended discussion in terms of their role as emblems of division and enclosure, and at the same time as boundaries to be erased or overcome. As in Ovid, walls demarcate the city as an urban entity at the same time as they define social relationships within it, not excluding those of an antagonistic character. Thus the Capulet servant Sampson's fatuous boast at the beginning of the play that "I will / take the wall of any man or maid of Montague's" (1.1.10-11), spawns a number of further jests on the subject of acts of violence potentially involving walls, Sampson brashly declaring that in the event of an altercation with the rival household "I will push Montague's men from the wall, and thrust his maids to the wall" (1.1.15-17). The Nurse recalls an occasion when she was sitting with the infant Juliet "under the dovehouse wall" when an earthquake struck and caused that wall to tremble (1.3.27). Perhaps significantly, this is an event that takes place the day following another incident that seems – at least according to the ribald commentary on it supplied by the

Nurse's husband – to presage Juliet's future sexual maturation (1.3.38-44), a development that will challenge the dominion of confining walls both in her own life and in that of Romeo. The same nurse will later be bidden to wait "behind the abbey wall" in order to take delivery of the rope ladder that will enable Romeo to breach once more the walls of the Capulet house, this time by way of Juliet's window (2.4.183), and by consummating his marriage with Juliet breach also the social barrier dividing the two lovers. Once again, it is tempting to suspect subterranean associations operating in the mind of the poet if not a deliberate symbolic strategy on his part.

In Ovid's story *Thisbe*, having abandoned the walled city of Babylon in order to encounter her lover, is compelled to take refuge in a cavern when she catches sight of the lioness. It is while she is thus concealed within the stone walls of what Golding describes as "a darke and yrkesome cave" (Ovid 2000, 89) that *Pyramus* arrives and, misconstruing the significance of the bloodstained mantle, slays himself. Analogously, if the force of love seems for a while to have enabled Romeo to penetrate the barriers, both physical and social, that divide him from Juliet, walls reassert the power they wield in human affairs as Shakespeare's play proceeds. Having killed *Tybalt*, and learning that the Prince has banished him from his native city, Romeo despondently remarks that "There is no world without Verona walls" (3.3.17). At the same time that walls once again interpose themselves as barriers separating him from Juliet, he recognizes that beyond those walls his life can have no meaning. But this is not all. Friar John fails to deliver the letter addressed to Romeo that has been entrusted to him by Friar Laurence because the "searchers of the town", suspecting that a house he is visiting harbours plague, "Seal'd up the doors and would not let us forth" (5.2.8, 11), sequestering him within the confines of the building and obliging him to abort his journey to Mantua. The consequence of this setback is that Romeo is not informed that what has been proclaimed as Juliet's death is merely part of an elaborate stratagem devised by the friar, so that when, in defiance of the Prince's edict of exile, he passes through the walls of Verona one final time it is with the intention of putting an end to his own life. The last wall standing between himself and Juliet is that of the Capulet monument, whose gate he pries open with the defiant exclamation "Thus I enforce thy rotten jaws to open" (5.3.47). Romeo has earlier asserted that "Stony limits cannot hold love out", and so it proves to be in this case as well, but the violation of confines comes at a price, and when Friar Laurence arrives at the tomb where Romeo has just killed Paris one of the first things he notices is the blood "which stains / The stony entrance of this sepulchre" (5.3.140-1). The figurative wall dividing the "two households" of the Montagues and the Capulets may disintegrate at the

moment of their reconciliation, but it is at the cost of their children having been immolated as the “Poor sacrifices of our enmity” (5.3.303), with the ironic consequence that those same households are destined to extinction. And if no walls stand between the lovers themselves at the conclusion of the play, it is only because they are both immured within the “palace of dim night” that is Juliet’s tomb (5.3.107), having crossed together the final boundary dividing life from death.

#### 4.

The image of the wall figures no less prominently in the play which, as has several times be mentioned in the course of this discussion, can profitably be read in tandem with *Romeo and Juliet*, this being *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In this case, however, it appears in the form of travesty, a modulation of tone which is not however entirely original with Shakespeare. If in Ovid’s story the image of Pyramus and Thisbe whispering to one another through a nearly invisible crack in a wall is emblematic of what Mazzotta describes as “the proximity and separation to which the two young lovers are doomed” (1986, 155), it is interesting to compare the manner in which Golding and Chaucer develop this detail, and to speculate on which of the two might have exerted the greater influence on Shakespeare’s treatment of it. In Golding the lovers at first reproach the wall for dividing them from one another, and subsequently express their gratitude for the fact that it at least makes possible their whispered exchanges, in accents that are on the whole subdued:

O thou envious wall (they sayd) why letst thou lovers thus?  
 What matter were it if that thou permitted both of us  
 In armes eche other to embrace? Or if thou thinke that this  
 Were overmuch, yet mightest thou at least make roume to kisse.  
 And yet thou shalt not finde us churles: we thinke our selves in det  
 For this same piece of courtesie, in vouching safe to let  
 Our sayings to our friendly eares thus freely come and goe.  
 (Ovid 2000, 88)

Talking to walls might seem a somewhat eccentric activity to engage in under any circumstances, but apart from this there is nothing notably ludicrous in Golding’s description, which does not in fact stray very far from the original.<sup>13</sup> In Chaucer however we have something that comes

<sup>13</sup> Although C.L. Barber refers to the “top-heavy personification which in Golding makes the wall into a sort of stubborn chaperon” (1990, 153 n.), Golding is actually respecting the tone of Ovid’s own lines, which run thus: “*invide*” *dicebant* “*paries, quid*

very near to burlesque, and it is a burlesque which anticipates that of the Pyramus and Thisbe sketch in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

And every day this wal they wolde threte,  
 And wisshe to god, that it were doun y-bete.  
 Thus wolde they seyn – “allas! Thou wikked wal,  
 Through thyn envye thou us letttest al!  
 Why nilt thou cleve, or fallen al a-two?  
 Or, at the leste, but thou woldest so,  
 Yit woldestow but ones lete us mete,  
 Or ones that we mighte kissen swete,  
 Than were we covered of our cares colde.  
 But natheles, yit be we to thee holde  
 In as muche as thou suffrest for to goon  
 Our wordes through thy lyme and eek thy stoon.  
 Yit oghte we with thee ben wel apayd.”  
 (1969, 369)

Whereas Golding remains fairly close to the Ovidian original in tone as well as content, Chaucer boisterously expands the comic potentialities latent in the lovers' habit of blaming the wall for their woes, having them castigate the barrier that stands between them in the most vehement terms before acknowledging that it does after all permit them to converse with one another and is therefore entitled to a measure of gratitude. As James W. Spisak suggests, “such apostrophe was surely an inspiration for Shakespeare to make his Wall ‘sensible’” (1984, 206), for in all essential respects this is how the wall is treated in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as well. In Shakespeare's comedy, indeed, just to make the situation as ridiculous as possible, what is described as “that vile wall which did these lovers sunder” (5.1.131) is not an inert stage property, as Capulet's orchard wall in *Romeo and Juliet* presumably is, but an animate being played by a human actor who not only walks on and off the stage but also pronounces a number of lines of his own.<sup>14</sup>

As is congruent with the sentience with which it has been endowed,

*amantibus obstas? / quantum erat, ut sineres toto nos corpore iungi / aut, hoc si nimium est, vel ad oscula danda pateres? / nec sumus ingrati: tibi nos debere fatemur, / quod datus est verbis ad amicas transitus auris.*” (1977, 182-4)

<sup>14</sup> With reference to the wall that Romeo scales in *Romeo and Juliet*, M.C. Bradbrook observes that “it is interesting to note the very obvious parody of this same orchard wall in the rustics' play of *Pyramus and Thisbe*” (1932, 39). Commenting on this remark, Barber suggests that Snout's objection in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that “You can never bring in a wall” (3.1.61), as the Pyramus story requires, “certainly seems a likely by-product of Shakespeare's having recent experience with the difficulty” (1990, 153 n.).



Pyramus at first addresses this wall in ingratiating terms intended to secure it as an ally, but changes register entirely when it fails to oblige him as fully as he expects:

And thou, O wall, O sweet, O lovely wall,  
 That stand'st between her father's ground and mine;  
 Thou wall, O wall, O sweet and lovely wall,  
 Show me thy chink, to blink through with mine eyne!  
 [*Wall stretches out his fingers.*]  
 Thanks, courteous wall: Jove shield thee well for this!  
 But what see I? No Thisbe do I see.  
 O wicked wall, through whom I see no bliss,  
 Curs'd be thy stones for thus deceiving me!  
 (5.1.172-9)

Although the courtesy attributed to the wall might originate with Golding's reference to "this same piece of courtesie" (Ovid 2000, 88), the "wicked wall" aspersion would, as Muir suggests, seem to derive from Chaucer (2005, 72-3). The words with which Shakespeare's Thisbe addresses the wall might also betray a Chaucerian reminiscence:

O wall, full often hast thou heard my moans,  
 For parting my fair Pyramus and me!  
 My cherry lips have often kiss'd thy stones,  
 Thy stones with lime and hair knit up in thee.  
 (5.1.186-9)

The reference to "stones with lime and hair" has no parallel in Golding's translation, nor for that matter in the Ovidian original, but may well hark back, as Douglas Bush points out, to Chaucer's allusion to "thy lyme and eek thy stoon" (1931, 146).

Nor is this the only indication in Thisbe's speech that Shakespeare may be thinking more of Chaucer than of Golding. Whereas Golding describes how the lovers, having terminated their whispered conversations, "eche gave kisses sweete / Unto the parget [plaster] on their side" (Ovid 2000, 89), Chaucer less delicately states that "The colde wal they wolden kisse of stoon" (1969, 369), and it would seem to be this that is echoed in Shakespeare's "My cherry lips have often kiss'd thy stones". Shakespeare indeed out-Chaucers Chaucer in the verve with which he renders Ovid into English, investing his words with a ribald secondary meaning of which his predecessor is innocent (see Partridge 1968: 121, s.v. "stone"). Pursuing this somewhat salacious vein, when Shakespeare's Pyramus entreats Thisbe to "kiss me through the hole of this vile wall", Thisbe responds "I kiss the wall's hole, not your lips at all" (5.1.198-9), words that are once again

susceptible to a bawdy construction (see Partridge 1968: 121, s.v. “hole”). It is because they are frustrated in their efforts to fulfil their passion for one another while the wall remains so obdurately present that the two young people make arrangements for what is potentially a more gratifying encounter beyond the city gates, while Wall, having discharged his part in the playlet and become irrelevant, “away doth go” (5.1.203). The scene now shifts to the tomb situated outside the city precincts to which the lovers have agreed to repair and where they will meet their fate. In their case as well, though only in parody, the repudiation of walls and what they signify will lead to death.

## 5.

It has often been noted that the sketch based on the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, with its depiction of a pair of lovers who are thwarted in their desire to wed and who elope into the forest beyond the confines of their city, reflects on the plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a whole.<sup>15</sup> What is less frequently accorded the attention it warrants are the implications of Bottom's brief commentary on the interlude at its conclusion: “the wall is down that parted their fathers” (5.1.337-8). The question that arises in connection with this remark is that of whose fathers, precisely, are being referred to. While Bottom's words obviously have some relevance to the story of Pyramus and Thisbe that has just been enacted, inasmuch as it is a physical wall that separates the dwellings occupied by the families of the two lovers, it is relevance of a very circumscribed kind.<sup>16</sup> The detail about it being ‘fathers’ who are divided seems to imply that there is an antagonism between the lovers’ parents of which the dividing wall is an emblem, whereas neither in the sketch nor in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a whole is there any suggestion that enmity between families plays any part in the drama whatsoever. Indeed, the only parent who has any role in the

<sup>15</sup> Marjorie Garber observes for instance that “as presented by Peter Quince and his players, ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’ is nothing less than the countermyth of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – the thing that did not happen, the tragedy encapsulated within the comedy and reduced to a manageable, bearable, and laughable fiction” (2005, 233-4). For a detailed discussion of the relevance of the Pyramus and Thisbe story to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, see Rudd 2000.

<sup>16</sup> If the emendation proposed by Brooks is correct, then Bottom's words may hark back to Theseus's remarks upon Wall's departure that “Now is the mure rased between the two neighbours” (5.1.204; see Shakespeare 2006, 159-62). Even if this is accepted, however, there seems no reason to assume that the word “neighbours” refers to anyone other than Pyramus and Thisbe themselves, in which case the conjectural emendation does not solve the problem posed by Bottom's words.

play is Hermia's father Egeus, whose motive for obstructing the marriage of his daughter to the man she loves is that he has another matrimonial project in mind for her. In the Pyramus and Thisbe sketch that is presented at Theseus's palace too no fathers are mentioned, and although Quince's original casting for the play does include Pyramus's father and both of Thisbe's parents these personages have been quietly suppressed before the final performance (1.2.56-9). But if it has only limited application to the interlude and to the play of which it is a part, Bottom's observation that "the wall is down that parted their fathers" does have a very close bearing on *Romeo and Juliet*, which concludes with the reconciliation of the two families whose strife has been responsible for the tragedy of the two young lovers of that play, and with the promise on the part of the grieving and penitent fathers to commission statues commemorating their children that will lie side by side (5.3.297-303).<sup>17</sup> As Amy J. Riess and George Walton Williams argue,

the barrier between feuding parents – not in Ovid, not in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, not in 'Pyramus and Thisby' – must allude to a situation that the audience would have recognized: the 'Pyramus and Thisby' playlet deconstructs the wall of *Romeo and Juliet* hostility and ends with *Romeo and Juliet* reconciliation.<sup>18</sup>

(1992, 215)

Though Wall merely departs from the scene once he has done his duty in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it is in *Romeo and Juliet* that a metaphorical wall dividing the two households manifestly though belatedly crumbles.

This is one of a number of occasions in which *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and more particularly the Pyramus and Thisbe sketch contained within it, seems to make sly reference to *Romeo and Juliet*. It has sometimes been maintained that the interlude is, as Samuel B. Hemingway argued over a century ago, "a burlesque not only of the romantic tragedy of love in general, but of *Romeo and Juliet* in particular" (1911, 80), as if Shakespeare was recoiling from the excessive sentimentality he had himself indulged in, perhaps in deference to the tastes of a paying public greedy for heady emotionalism, in that other play. But there are signs, too, that the game of oblique reference might not be operating in one direction only, and that it is as much *Romeo and Juliet* that is echoing *A Mid-*

<sup>17</sup> It is Capulet who uses the verb "lie" (5.3.302), which suggests that the effigies are intended to surmount a sarcophagus or tomb rather than stand erect. If this is the case, then the surviving parents of Romeo and Juliet are fulfilling the dying wish expressed by Thisbe that, as Chaucer puts it, "in o grave y-fere we moten lye" (1969, 371).

<sup>18</sup> Barber makes a similar point (1990, 152 n.).

*summer Night's Dream* as the reverse.<sup>19</sup> The fact that Mercutio, in his astonishing Queen Mab speech, is as A.D. Nuttall puts it "allowed to imagine the as yet unwritten *Midsummer Night's Dream*" (2007, 108) is an obvious case in point, but I wish to conclude this discussion with an instance that is more immediately pertinent to the story of Pyramus and Thisbe whose reverberations we have been tracing here. For some readers at least, one of the most incongruous moments in *Romeo and Juliet* is that following the discovery of the inanimate body of Juliet on the morning she is supposed to marry Paris. The audience is of course aware that Juliet is not really dead, but only slumbering under the effects of Friar Laurence's potion, but no one upon the stage except for the friar himself is possessed of such knowledge. As Juliet's family converge upon the scene they embark upon a curious series of antiphonal laments which, while taking their inspiration from Brooke, go much further than him. Capulet informs Paris that Death has "lain with" Juliet (4.5.36), and although there may be some covert irony to be discerned in the implicit association between the personified figure of Death and Romeo himself, and in the assimilation of the principles of Eros and Thanatos that is reflected in such an association, the description of the girl as "Flower as she was, deflowered by him" seems a trifle too mannered for a man in the throes of grief (4.5.37). What is interesting is that the image of death as deflowering is also found in the Pyramus and Thisbe sketch in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, when Pyramus says that "lion vile hath here deflower'd my dear" (5.1.281), the sexual connotations of the word being plainly ridiculous in this latter context. As Riess and Williams point out, the word "deflower" is a "revamping of Golding's word 'Devour'", from which it might be inferred that Shakespeare "changed 'devour' to 'deflower' so that Pyramus could echo Capulet", and that "the inappropriateness of the usage in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* argues strongly that the appropriate usage preceded in *Romeo and Juliet*" (1992, 217).

This is a plausible line of argument, but what is perhaps to be questioned is the extent to which the usage of the word in *Romeo and Juliet* is indeed to be regarded as appropriate, for the fact is that the entire se-

<sup>19</sup> This is not the place to go into the vexed issue of the relative chronology of the two works. Different editors and commentators have expressed varying opinions about whether *Romeo and Juliet* preceded *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or whether the reverse is the case. Suffice it to say that, as Harold F. Brooks puts it, "what cannot be doubted, whichever play is the earlier, is the close relationship between them" (2006, xlv). It is perhaps worth adding that before they were actually printed in the respective quarto versions of each (1597 in the case of the first quarto of *Romeo and Juliet*, and 1600 in that of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), it is perfectly possible that either or both could have been modified in the light of the other.

quence of dirges that follows the discovery of Juliet's apparently lifeless body borders dangerously on the farcical. Capulet himself is propelled by the force of his conceit about Death the dark bridegroom to the brink of absurdity:

Death is my son-in-law, Death is my heir.  
My daughter he hath wedded. I will die,  
And leave him all: life, living, all is Death's.  
(4.5.38-40)

It seems improbable that we are to take this entirely seriously, and any temptation to do so would be undercut by the Nurse's contribution to the succession of lamentations uttered by those gathered about the body of Juliet. For after Lady Capulet has railed against the "Accurs'd, unhappy, wretched, hateful day!" (4.5.43), the Nurse, not to be outdone, launches into her own variation on the theme:

O woe! O woeful, woeful, woeful day.  
Most lamentable day. Most woeful day  
That ever, ever I did yet behold.  
O day, O day, O day, O hateful day.  
Never was seen so black a day as this.  
O woeful day, O woeful day.  
(4.5.49-54)

While it may be the aqua-vitae she has called for that most immediately prompts this inspired outburst (4.5.16), what should not be overlooked is that the Nurse's words have a striking parallel in the passage in the Pyramus and Thisbe sketch in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in which Pyramus, approaching the wall through which he is to speak to Thisbe, pronounces the following lines:

O grim-look'd night! O night with hue so black!  
O night, which ever art when day is not!  
O night, O night, alack, alack, alack,  
I fear my Thisbe's promise is forgot!  
(5.1.168-71)

Although Pyramus's words might seem to be a travesty of the Nurse's diatribe, the fact is that the Nurse's words are already so ludicrous in themselves as to make parody superfluous. What appears more likely instead is that it is the Nurse's words which – whether through recollection or anticipation – are echoing those uttered by Pyramus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. If such is the case then what we are observing, once again, is not only a verbal link between the two plays, and what amounts to being a

tacit invitation to read each in the light of the other, but a deliberate signal embedded in *Romeo and Juliet* that lying in the background of that play as well is the Ovidian story of star-crossed lovers that inspires the theatrical efforts of Peter Quince and his companions.

## Works Cited

- Barber, C.L. 1990. *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: a Study of Dramatic Form and Its Relation to Social Custom*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Bate, Jonathan. 2001. *Shakespeare and Ovid*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 2000. "Shakespeare's Ovid". In *Ovid's Metamorphoses: The Arthur Golding Translation 1567*. Edited by John Frederick Nims, xli-l. Philadelphia, PA: Paul Dry Books.
- 1997. *The Genius of Shakespeare*. London: Picador.
- Bradbrook, M.C. 1932. *Elizabethan Stage Conditions: a Study of Their Place in the Interpretation of Shakespeare's Plays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brooke, Arthur. 1908. *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*. Edited by J.J. Munro. New York NY: Duffield and Company.
- Brooks, Harold F. 2006. "Introduction" to the Arden Edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Harold F. Brooks. Rpt. London: Bloomsbury.
- Bush, Douglas. 1931. "The Tedious Brief Scene of Pyramus and Thisbe". *Modern Language Notes* 46 (3): 144-7.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. 1969. *Complete Works*. Edited by Walter W. Skeat. London: Oxford University Press.
- Forey, Madeleine. 1998. "'Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee! Thou art translated!': Ovid, Golding, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*". *Modern Language Review* 93: 321-9.
- Freeman, Donald C. 1999. "'The Rack Dislimns': Schema and Metaphorical Pattern in *Antony and Cleopatra*". *Poetics Today* 20: 443-60.
- Garber, Marjorie. 2005. *Shakespeare After All*. New York NY: Anchor Books.
- Gibbons, Brian. 1993. "Introduction" to the Arden Edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, edited by Brian Gibbons, 1-77. London: Routledge.
- Hardy, Barbara. 1997. *Shakespeare's Storytellers: Dramatic Narration*. London: Peter Owen.
- Hemingway, Samuel B. 1911. "The Relation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to *Romeo and Juliet*". *Modern Language Notes* 26 (3): 78-80.
- Hight, Gilbert. 1985. *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Hunt, Maurice. 1988. "Compelling Art in *Titus Andronicus*". *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 28 (2): 197-218.
- Keightley, Thomas. 1867. *The Shakespeare-Expositor: an Aid to the Perfect Understanding of Shakespeare's Plays*. London: J. Russell Smith.
- Keith, A.M. 2001. "Etymological Wordplay in Ovid's 'Pyramus and Thisbe' (Met. 4.55-166)". *The Classical Quarterly* 51 (1): 309-12.

- Kermode, Frank. 2001. *Shakespeare's Language*. London: Penguin.
- Knox, Peter E. 2014. "Ovidian Myths on Pompeian Walls". In John F. Miller and Carole E. Newlands, *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid*, 36-54. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.
- 1989. "Pyramus and Thisbe in Cyprus". *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 92: 315-28.
- Lucking, David. 2012. *Making Sense in Shakespeare*. Amsterdam-New York, NY: Rodopi.
- 2011. "Translation and Metamorphosis in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*". *Essays in Criticism* 61 (2): 137-54.
- Marlowe, Christopher. 1963. *The Complete Plays*. Edited by Irving Ribner. New York NY: Odyssey Press.
- Maslen, R.W. 2000. "Myths Exploited: the Metamorphoses of Ovid in early Elizabethan England". In *Shakespeare's Ovid: The "Metamorphoses" in the Plays and Poems*. Edited by A.B. Taylor, 15-30. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mazzotta, Giuseppe. 1986. *The World at Play in Boccaccio's Decameron*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Muir, Kenneth. 2005. *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays*. 1977. London: Routledge.
- 1954. "Pyramus and Thisbe: A Study in Shakespeare's Method". *Shakespeare Quarterly* 5 (2): 141-53.
- Munro, J.J. 1908. "Introduction" to Arthur Brooke's *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*. Edited by J.J. Munro, ix-lxii. New York NY: Duffield and Company.
- Nuttall, A.D. 2007. *Shakespeare the Thinker*. New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press.
- Ovid. 2000. *Ovid's Metamorphoses: The Arthur Golding Translation 1567*. Edited by John Frederick Nims. Philadelphia, PA: Paul Dry Books.
- 1977. *Metamorphoses*. Vol. 1, Books 1-8. Trans. Frank Justus Miller. Rpt. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Partridge, Eric. 1968. *Shakespeare's Bawdy*. London: Routledge.
- Riess, Amy J., and George Walton Williams. 1992. "'Tragical Mirth': From Romeo to Dream". *Shakespeare Quarterly* 43 (2): 214-8.
- Rudd, Niall. 2000. "Pyramus and Thisbe in *Shakespeare and Ovid*". In *Shakespeare's Ovid: the Metamorphoses in the Plays and Poems*. Edited by A.B. Taylor, 113-25. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shakespeare, William. 2006. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Edited by Harold F. Brooks. London: Bloomsbury.
- 2001. *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*. Edited by Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan. London: Thomson Learning.
- 1995. *Titus Andronicus*. Edited by Jonathan Bate. London: Routledge.
- 1993. *Romeo and Juliet*. Edited by Brian Gibbons. London: Routledge.
- Spisak, James W. 1984. "Chaucer's Pyramus and Thisbe". *The Chaucer Review* 18 (3): 204-10.
- Taylor, A.B. 2004. "Ovid's Myths and the Unsmooth Course of Love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*". In *Shakespeare and the Classics*, edited by Charles Mar-



- tindale and A.B. Taylor, 49-65. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ed. 2000. *Shakespeare's Ovid: the Metamorphoses in the Plays and Poems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Valls-Russell, Janice. 2010. "So pale did shine the moon on Pyramus': Biblical Resonances of an Ovidian Myth in *Titus Andronicus*". *Anagnórisis* 2: 57-82.
- Waith, Eugene M. 1957. "The Metamorphosis of Violence in *Titus Andronicus*". *Shakespeare Survey* 10: 39-49.
- West, Grace Starry. 1982. "Going by the Book: Classical Allusions in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*". *Studies in Philology* 79 (1): 62-77.
- Willson, Robert F. 1969. "Golding's Metamorphoses and Shakespeare's Burlesque Method in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*". *English Language Notes* 7: 18-25.

CRISTINA CONSIGLIO\*

## ***Hamlet Overseas. The Acting Technique of Edwin Booth***

Abstract

Often regarded as the premiere American Shakespearean actor of the late nineteenth century, Edwin Booth (1833-1893) distinguished himself as an interpreter of Hamlet through his exceptional ability to bring his experience from life to art. From the beginning of his career, in the 1850s, he brought Shakespeare to the American scene going beyond the boundaries of the English tradition; in performing the character of the Prince of Denmark, he paved the way for a new era in American theatre. After an initial struggle to find his acting style, he became a star, from the moment he first played Hamlet in New York in 1857, through his legendary 'hundred nights Hamlet' in 1864-1865, to his farewell performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1891. Starting from the broader perspective of how Shakespeare entered American culture from the end of the 18th century on, the aim of this paper is to focus on Edwin Booth as one of the most acclaimed performers on the American stage and one of the most significant example of the actor-managers – from the Hallams to Edwin Forrest, and the Booths, who emerged in the early to mid-nineteenth century to largely replace the itinerant stars – who played such an important part in bringing Shakespeare to America.

KEYWORDS: American theatre; Shakespeare; *Hamlet*; Edwin Booth

### **1. Shakespeare in America**

There are a variety of factors at play in the emergence of Shakespeare on the other side of the Atlantic, since, at least at the beginning, the stories of the published texts and of the performance of the plays run their own separate ways. Shakespeare was part of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the first colonists, but they were the same seventeenth-century Puritans who left England to avoid, among other things, Renaissance drama (Dobson 1996, 189). While on the one hand it is not likely that the first English travelers took with them a copy of a drama or a poem, on the other hand it is true that they spoke Shakespeare's language in all its variety and vitality, a language that would survive better in the New World than in the Old (Cabot Lodge 1885, 256). The history of the circulation of Shakespeare's texts in the colonies began approximately at the end of the seventeenth

\* University of Bari – [cristina.consiglio@uniba.it](mailto:cristina.consiglio@uniba.it)

century, when parts of his plays were published in anthologies of poems as examples of poetry and rhetoric. In the same years, a few copies of the *folios* made their appearance in the private libraries of landowners and gentlemen and between the 1720s and the 1740s the universities of Harvard and Yale had a complete series of Shakespeare's plays on their shelves. In other words, in the territories of New England Shakespeare was read before being acted, to avoid the idea of corruption connected to the idea of the performance. The second half of the eighteenth-century, in New York, Virginia and North Carolina, saw the first theatrical productions thanks to certain English companies of actors importing the art of theatre from their motherland, such as the London Company of Comedians, which Lewis Hallam brought from London to Williamsburg in 1752 to stage *The Merchant of Venice*, usually considered to be the first professional performance of Shakespeare in America.<sup>1</sup>

In the eighteenth-century, Shakespearean texts and performances had different audiences; a less educated or simply a more heterogeneous and rather noisy public went to see the plays, often – just like the Elizabethans – without any knowledge of the texts, as books containing the plays were not readily accessible. As the English visitor Frances Trollope noted in 1832 “the applause is expressed by cries and thumping with the feet, instead of clapping” (Levine 1988, 25); a more educated public would have read the Bard's soliloquies and speeches in their quiet closets, peacefully sitting in their armchairs.<sup>2</sup>

It is equally true that what reached the stage were the earliest appropriations of Shakespeare, a ‘Shakespeare improved’, as it was defined, shorter versions of the original plays from which full scenes were omitted, some characters forgotten, sexual references rendered more palatable and the tragic endings replaced by unlikely reconciliations. It was a Shakespeare

<sup>1</sup> There are records of some earlier Shakespeare performances, though very little is known about them. In 1730 a jocular New York physician named Joachimus Bertrand advertised that he was about to play the Apothecary in an amateur performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. In March and April 1750 *Richard III* (Colley Cibber's version) was staged in New York by a company headed by Walter Murray and Thomas Kean, who would later take their repertory into Maryland and Virginia. In December 1751 Robert Hupton, a man who had been sent to New York in advance of the Hallam company to serve as their agent but then set up on his own, performed *Othello*.

<sup>2</sup> The first American-produced copies of Shakespeare's complete works were published in Philadelphia in 1795, only twelve years after the end of the War of Independence, but 172 years after the First Folio appeared in London. Shakespeare was available to American citizens in eight duodecimo volumes for the price of one dollar each. While the title maintained that the edition was ‘Corrected from the Latest and Best London Editions’, the ‘Preface’ and ‘The Life of the Author’ were both written by an American living in Philadelphia and dated 1 July 1795 (Sturgess 2014, 60-1).

presented as integrated into the culture they enjoyed, a more familiar and intimate version of the original, though always faithful to the vividness of his characters and perfectly in accord with a nation that placed the individual at the center of the universe. “Learned and wealthy colonials gradually became more aware of Shakespeare’s plays” and “a number of amateur actors informally performed Shakespeare in several American cities” (Sturgess 2014, 55). From the first documented American performance of a Shakespearean play in the 1750s until the closing of the theatres during the American Revolution in 1774, the Bard was already the most popular playwright in the colonies. After the Revolution he was still the most widely performed dramatist in an increasing number of cities and towns (Levine 1988, 16).

In the nineteenth century things started to change as the worlds of the published texts and the stage began to converge, giving life to a deep and longstanding experience with Shakespeare, “based upon the language and eloquence, the artistry and humor, the excitement and action, the moral sense and the worldview that Americans found in Shakespearean drama” (45).

Shakespeare’s plays were published in American editions, his works taught in school and colleges as declamation and rhetoric, they became part of university programs; allusions and quotations were a regular feature of nineteenth-century newspapers. In the meantime, in contrast with the previous century, when several English actors came to the New world to seek their fortune in a less sophisticated environment than London – in what Shattuck called “the westward flow of Shakespearean actors” (1976, 31) –, now the new generations were starting to establish themselves as professional performers and skillful and tireless managers, gaining fame and financial rewards in return for their efforts. Books had become a new vehicle for disseminating Shakespeare, but the stage remained the primary instrument. Wherever there was an audience for the theater, there his plays were performed frequently and prominently, amid a full range of contemporary entertainments.

## **2. Edwin Booth’s Early Career**

Against this promising background, the premier American Shakespearean actor of the closing decades of the 19th century emerged: Edwin Booth (1833-1893)<sup>3</sup> was one of the first performers to cross the United States from

<sup>3</sup> More than one biography of Edwin Booth has been written. The first was *Life and Art of Edwin Booth* by William Winter, published in 1893, a more extended version of a text published in 1872 when Booth was still alive, soon to be followed by *Edwin Booth:*

East to West and back, and to gain international recognition. His exceptional acting qualities actually reveal only one of the aspects that make his story remarkable. He committed himself to becoming a good performer but at the same time he moved the American theatre forward, playing his roles in a more subtle and intellectualized fashion than most of the other leading actors of the first half of the century had and improving the style and the scenery of the theatrical productions. The experience of Edwin Booth can be read as a subjective synthesis of the history of Shakespeare both in the stage and in published form in the United States: as a result of his experience on the stage, he became aware of the need to capture on paper, in his notes and letters, thoughts and reflections on how tradition was changing and improving. He thus paved the way for a new era in American theatre, which was both grateful to the past and ready to free itself from it.

Booth was a rather small man and by no means of the heroic school. He was shy, somber, and retiring in company. In terms of technique, however, he was probably the finest actor of his time, and certainly he was the most celebrated and the best loved. He was not versatile, had no talent for general comedy and he did not have an aptitude to play lovers and most comic characters, but he was capable of sardonic humor and emotional intensity.

He was the son of Junius Brutus Booth, an eccentric, who in 1821 left

*Recollections by His Daughter Edwina Booth Grossmann, and Letters to Her and to His Friends*, published in 1894. Another biography written during Booth's life is the one by his sister Asia Booth Clarke entitled *The Elder and the Younger Booth*, published in 1882. The most recent ones are the best-seller *Prince of Players: Edwin Booth* by Eleanor Ruggles, published in 1953 and *Edwin Booth: A Bio-Bibliography* by L. Terry Oggel in 1992. Very recently another interesting and detailed work has been written by Arthur B. Bloom, *Edwin Booth: A Biography and Performance History* (2013), the result of extremely thorough research of "letters, promptbooks, financial records, broadsides, playbills, newspaper advertisements, reviews, extant costumes and books and magazines from that period" (Bloom 2013, 1). In my opinion, his daughter's recollections and Oggel's chapter about Booth's *Biographical Sketches* are maybe the most direct and personal accounts of his life (together with the work by William Winter and the words of praise written by his co-star Lawrence Barrett in 1886), while the more recent works provide a more faithful portrait of the actor and of the man. Other biographical studies are: C. Townsend Copeland, *Edwin Booth* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1901); R. Lockridge, *Darling of Misfortune: Edwin Booth 1833-1893* (New York: Century Company, 1932); S. Kimmel, *The Mad Booths of Maryland* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1940; rev. ed., New York: Dover, 1969). See also: K. Goodale, *Behind the Scenes with Edwin Booth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931); C.H. Shattuck, *The Hamlet of Edwin Booth* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971); D.J. Watermeier, *Between Actor and Critic: Selected Letters of Edwin Booth and William Winter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971); C.H. Shattuck, "The Theatrical Management of Edwin Booth", in *The Theatrical Manager in England and America*, ed. J.W. Donohue (Princeton University Press, 1971).

England to settle in the United States. There he had three sons who would, like him, take up an acting career, Edwin, Junius Brutus Jr and John Wilkes, who would be sadly remembered for being the murderer of Abraham Lincoln in 1865.

The beginning of the youngest Booth's career on stage was in the West. Edwin went to California with his father, Junius Brutus the Elder, in the summer of 1852. They arrived in San Francisco in July. Late that summer, when they were in Sacramento, Edwin was able to take his first professional benefit. When his father saw him dressed in tragic blacks, he exclaimed "You look like Hamlet" (Shattuck 1969, 3). Whether this was intended as a prediction is impossible to know. In the same way that the name of Sarah Siddons recalls the character of Lady Macbeth or Edmund Kean is Othello, as metaphors of dramatic perfection, there is no doubt that in the history of the American theatre Edwin Booth's name will be inextricably linked to the Prince of Denmark, from his first appearance as Hamlet in San Francisco in 1853 to the last in 1891.

About forty years of performances, full of changes and evolutions, were characterized by a word that the drama critics used from the beginning to describe Booth's art: *flexibility*. Echoing Hazlitt's words quoted by Ferdinand Ewer in his first review of a performance in California, the young actor brought to the stage "all the easy motion and peaceful curves of a wave of the sea". In Ewer's words, "Booth's Hamlet puts to the blush any attempt in the same character we have seen in California"; in terms of portrayal it was superior even to the Hamlet of his late great father. The young critic claimed that Booth had perfectly realized his ideal:

Melancholy without gloom, contemplative yet without misanthropy, philosophical yet enjoying playfulness in social converse, a man by himself yet with ardent feelings of friendship, a thorough knower of human nature, Hamlet stands the type of all that is firm, dignified, gentlemanly and to be respected in a man.

(Shattuck 1967, 21)

Maybe Booth did not understand what Ewer meant. At the beginning of his career he just behaved like young bachelor: he gambled, drank too much, and got involved with women. He played what he had to play, developing his skills and his popularity with the public as best he could. If an actor's stage characters were reflections of his own personal character, the quiet, introspective, refined quality of his acting was but an extension of his own personal modesty, pensiveness, and gentility. Although a versatile actor, except in his portrayals of lovers and most comic characters, he was at his best in the portrayal of brooding, melancholy characters like Brutus and Hamlet, and of lively histrionic characters like Richelieu and Iago.

Undoubtedly his greatest creation and the one most reflective of his own personality was his Hamlet. Dark, melancholy, lyrical, shadowy but not vague, repeatedly reworked into an external form that was apparently simple yet actually rich in nuance, spiritual but intensively alive, Booth's Hamlet, like some of Albert Pinkham Ryder's haunting paintings<sup>4</sup>, created an atmosphere, as the American dramatic critic William Winter once wrote, of "dread sublimity and awe" (Watermeier 1971, 12). When Booth first played the role for which he would become most celebrated,<sup>5</sup> his youth was a barrier to imparting the proper weight and dignity to the character. Though there were "a few disagreeable faults in intonation and delivery", the review that appeared in the *Alta* of 26 April predicted "a high degree of success for the promising young artist" (Watermeier 2005, 84).

When Booth returned east in 1856, *Hamlet* was in his repertory, but only incidentally. In Booth's first performances it was possible to discern traces of the London tragic school; the young man's training in elocution reflected the general turning away among orators and actors from mechanical theories of expression to a new concept of naturalness. Booth moved on from the ranting style of his father's generation of actors to a more natural delivery. At the same time, audiences were looking for something more refined, and theatre entertainment was developing into an essential part of American city life. The question of realism in the theatre would become the central issue in American drama for the next twenty-five years. A conflict of opinion arose from the ancient antithesis of 'nature' and 'art'. It was a question that had been debated in America by the followers of Edwin Forrest and Charles Macready in the 1840s and 1850s, and of Edwin Forrest and Edwin Booth in the 1860s and 1870s (Kinne 1954, 11).

Between 1856 and 1857 Booth met the actress Mary Devlin, the woman whom he would marry soon after. They performed together in New York, Boston, Baltimore and Richmond and she gave him useful advice about per-

<sup>4</sup> Albert Pinkham Ryder (1847-1917) was an American painter; his visionary, romantic and highly imaginative paintings were dominated by literature and religion. He rebelled against the traditional discipline and abandoned realistic painting; his human figures are embedded in nature, their posture and gestures hardly distinguishable from their setting.

<sup>5</sup> On April 25, 1853, Booth played Hamlet for the first time, before an all-male audience of demonstrative frontiersmen. The men of the Gold Rush prided themselves on their connoisseurship in literature and the arts, and especially in the art of acting. To a man they had been admirers of Booth's father, Junius Brutus Booth, who only a few months before had given his last performance for them before going back to east to die. The *Hamlet* night seems to have been a triumph from the beginning. It was reviewed by Ferdinand Ewer, a young man himself, intelligent, sensitive, educated in literature and philosophy at Harvard College, and alert to the coming spirit of the age, who became Booth's first prophet (Shattuck 1966, 1-14).



forming: she could see that theatrical tastes were shifting towards elegance. The outsized, heavily masculine style of the 'old school' was on its way out. Mary Devlin helped Booth find his level and he learned to capitalize on his swift body, musical voice, and glowing eyes. In New York he also met Adam Badeau, a brilliant young litterateur, who was one of his greatest admirers<sup>6</sup> and helped Booth to repair the gaps in his education. In 1860, after a two-year absence from the New York stage, he performed his 'new' Hamlet.

He was the first actor of the American stage to dare to deliver a Hamlet soliloquy sitting in a chair<sup>7</sup> and then, in the midst of it, get up and walk to another position. A.C. Sprague pointed out that an English actor had sat for the soliloquy as early as 1854, while Booth had introduced this touch of 'realism' in the early 1860s. By 1870 the expedient no longer occasioned surprise. Nonetheless, on 7 January 1780 the critic of the *Times* praised the free use of seats from which to deliver the soliloquies for giving variety to the scene, and two days later the critic of the *World* noted that "the impulsive and unpremeditated negligence of attitude was superior to the delivery of the passage in oratorical style" (Shattuck 1969, 187).

In a discussion with Henry Tuckerman of New York, on the character of *Hamlet*, that gentleman, who had witnessed many of the old actors, observed to Booth that they all stood during the soliloquies, and inquired if it were not possible to alter this. On the next representation of 'Hamlet', Booth, seated, began the soliloquy 'To be or not to be.' Mr Tuckerman, watching the play, could not conceive how *Hamlet* could rise from that chair with propriety and grace. When at the words, 'to sleep, perchance to dream', after an instant of reflection, during which the mind of *Hamlet* had penetrated the eternal darkness vivid with dreams, he rose with the horror of that terrible 'perchance' stamped upon his features, continuing, 'Ay, there's the rub!' His friend was satisfied that the actor had caught the inspiration of the lines in the reflective pause (Booth Clarke 1882, 153-4).

In later stagings the chair used for the soliloquy stood to the left of the center table; Booth walked over to it and sank into it, silent, one hand at his temple, his face was taut with the concentrated working of his mind. The

<sup>6</sup> In 1859 Badeau wrote in *The Vagabond*: "Edwin Booth has made me know what tragedy is. He has displayed to my eyes an entirely new field; he has opened to me the door to another and exquisite delight; he has shown me the possibilities of tragedy. Though he has not yet done all that he has pointed at, there are moments in his acting in which he is full of the divine fire, in which the animation that clothes him as with a garment, the halo of genius that surrounds him, not only recalls what I have not of others; not only suggests, but incarnates and embodies my highest notions of tragedy" (Clarke Booth 1882, 68).

<sup>7</sup> Only a minor English actor, Henry Nicholls, had sat while delivering "To be or not to be" several years earlier.

audience seemed to feel that the man was alone with his thoughts, and that they were far removed from his consideration. Booth's rising at exactly the moment when he pronounces 'there's the rub' is marked in all the prompt-books, with his left hand drawn up to his breast.

The new pose is shown in photographs and paintings where Booth is portrayed sitting in an ornate chair, in a contemplative pose that was copied by other actors. It was a ground-breaking move when Booth first made it. For the audience of the time, his Hamlet was physical and startling, so it is ironic now that one of his most famous images depicts him 'at rest'. From Booth's promptbook, we get a view of a restless, tortured Hamlet; sitting for the 'suicide speech', although merely an outward sign of the Hamlet Booth created, put the emphasis on Hamlet's inner struggles. Outwardly unfailingly polite, princely, mournful, and thoughtful, other images of him in the role show his hand nearly always at his heart, a Hamlet torn by love and duty.

"Booth also introduced sitting on the tomb in the graveyard when, with his face half buried on *Horatio's* shoulder, he speaks as if to his own heart, the words 'What! the fair Ophelia?' His resting previously on the tomb is most natural and graceful, and, imbued with these qualities, it cannot fail to be effective." (154) As regards the 'graveyard scene' it is also worth remembering that Booth put less emphasis on the memory of Yorick than he did on the memory of his father. He undoubtedly wanted to remember his servant but he rather quickly got rid of Yorick's skull, while in the ghost scenes, at the end of the first act, he would fall to the ground and weep with such realism that he was criticized for being 'obscene' for revealing such private grief so completely.

The approval garnered in New York encouraged Booth to open his horizons and in 1861 he decided to travel to Europe, together with his wife and daughter. He played his major roles in London, Liverpool, and Manchester and when he returned to America he was acclaimed as an international star. When he reopened the Winter Garden with his Hamlet in 1863, he had risen above the implied rivalry with his father, but now he found himself compared with Edwin Forrest, his father's contemporary. Forrest's style was distinctly masculine and loud. Booth's quieter style and his intriguing good looks – his dark eyes, his black curly hair, and his slight build –, won over the public.

Booth believed that the arts were steadily arriving at a peak of perfection, there to be fixed, and consolidated against decay. Just as his friend Horace Howard Furness of Philadelphia was gathering into his *New Variorum* volumes all that past wisdom from study could teach about Shakespeare, so Booth was ensuring the conservation of the art of theatre. The canon of his theatre was the noblest of the so-called Standard Drama. This

meant, first of all, the 'best' of Shakespeare, checking the texts through the many editions back to the First Folio, then trimming them into conformity with theatrical requirements and approved modern taste; and when he published them in his Prompt-book edition, he imagined that these versions would serve the profession for generations to come. He then started to work on another project, the recovery of the texts of the Shakespearean plays that had been altered by other editors – like *Richard III* by Colley Cibber or *King Lear* by Nahum Tate – and the issue of new editions of them. Booth published two sets of his promptbooks over the next two decades.

As far as his *Hamlet* was concerned, he did not properly 'restore' it for *Hamlet* had never been rewritten. He concentrated the text around his main character more than any other actor-manager had done before. His acting version was 2750 lines long,<sup>8</sup> only about 220 longer than the commonly used acting version printed in the *Modern Standard Drama*. Though accurate, this version proved to be too long. From Booth's later promptbooks we learn that he shortened the opening scene by having the Ghost enter only once, he omitted the first forty lines of "Now I am alone", he shortened the *Mousetrap* and dropped several other lines from the Laertes-King conspiracy. In a further reduction the opening scene was not performed at all, along with Hamlet's Advice to the Players, and the scene where the King sends Hamlet to England was omitted while many lines were cut from the soliloquies. The operation of restoration of the text consisted also in cleansing it of its "burden of filth-lines", in accordance with Booth's image of Hamlet as a most delicate and exquisitely refined creature, surely not accustomed to such rough talk. For the same reason, in the dialogue with his mother he limited himself to arousing her sense of shame without

<sup>8</sup> "Exactly as Booth's predecessors had done, he omitted the entire 'outside story' of the Norwegian wars, and thereby the coming of Fortinbras and the great soliloquy 'How all occasions do inform against me'. He deprived Laertes and Polonius of about 40 lines of their advice to Ophelia. He omitted the 'dram of eale' speech. In the second act he dropped Reynaldo, much of the amusing small talk between Hamlet and his old school friends, all the topical discussion of the plight of the players, and much of the 'rugged Pyrrhus' stuff. He cut most of Hamlet's dialogue with Ophelia during the Play scene and much of the *Mousetrap* dialogue. He cut about 70 lines from the scene between Hamlet and his mother. In the fourth act he economized far beyond his predecessors, omitting scene 1, 2, 4, and 6 entirely and reducing the whole act by nearly 300 lines. In the fifth act he dropped 50 lines from the Osric scene and the entrance of 'a Lord'. His restorations include many small and mostly not significant scraps. The inclusion of Polonius' advice to Laertes (25 lines) can hardly be counted as a Booth restoration, for although it is not printed in the *Modern Standard Drama* version, most producers from at least Macready's time had included it. He restored the King's Prayer scene and Hamlet's 'Not I might do it pat' soliloquy (64 lines). He restored to the fifth act Hamlet's narrative of his sea-adventures (74 lines)" (Shattuck 1969, xvi-xvii).

accusing her and always avoided lines like “let the royal bed of Denmark be a couch for luxury and damned incest”. Furthermore, the sexual imagery was almost totally eliminated: When Booth’s Hamlet decided to murder the King, he did not refer to “the incestuous pleasure of his bed”, nor did he threaten Ophelia or mention that Strumpet Dame Fortune to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. It is necessary to remember that most of the sexual elements had already been cut in Garrick’s time, so Booth was not the only one to remove them, but surely in any event he would not have restored them. What Booth’s text most lacked was Hamlet’s savagery, the ferocious anger, the cruelty, the ribaldry. American society in those decades was aspiring, at times frantically, even comically, to gentility. It took Hamlet for its ideal and its Hamlet had to be irreproachable (Shattuck 1967, 36). He also introduced a pleasant Christian touch near the end of the first scene, for an audience that had not altogether forgotten the old association of playhouse and sin. Booth himself believed in the idealized, gentlemanized Hamlet of his acting version and he rarely looked at or remembered the parts he had left out.

Booth sought to do for the classics in America what such major English actors as Charles Kean and Macready had done in London in the 1850s: by going into management after years of starring on the stage. Though not comparable either to the simplicity of the Elizabethan scenes that merely suggested the situation or to the ‘historical accuracy’ that the art of the cinema would later take, he put on splendid productions that benefitted from authoritative research, such as his successful 1864-1865 *Hamlet* with a perfect combination of mechanical and artistic resources, including stage decorations, massive stone stairways, that distant blue above them, and blocks of stones in the ceiling of the palace. The period in which he set the play was tenth-century Denmark, evoked with walls of stone blocks, heavy columns and round arches decorated with zig-zags. As Shattuck underlined, in general tone and in many details Booth’s production of *Hamlet* would have reminded a modern audience Lawrence Olivier’s black-and-white *Hamlet* movie (1967, 37).

As for other remarkable productions, his 1869 *Romeo and Juliet* lavishly captured Italian streets, sunny gardens and cypress-shaded precincts, and in the opening Grand Square scene of his 1871 *Julius Caesar* there were the facades of a dozen splendid buildings facing the square and rising awesomely against the background of the Roman hills, while for the Senate Chamber scene Booth made use of the extreme height of his stage to create the appearance of a high barrel-vaulted ceiling and, beyond that, a long hallway of similar vaults separating a series of domes.

### 3. The Challenging 1860s

By the summer of 1864 Booth could claim mastery of several Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean roles and his importance as an actor was unquestionable. One of the outstanding moments of his career was the theatrical enterprise that made him famous, known to history as ‘the great Shakespearean event of the country’: a hundred consecutive nights performing *Hamlet*. This remarkable season began in November 26, 1864 and ended on March 22, 1865, a record broken only by yet another season of *Hamlet*<sup>9</sup> in 1923 (Sturgess 2014, 16). The production was well staged, excellently cast, and secured the fame of Edwin Booth as the *Hamlet par excellence* of the American stage. No such revival of a Shakespearean play had taken place since the days of Charles Kean, at the Old Park. No one envisaged a lengthy run when it began and before long Booth became tired and bored with it, calling its success “terrible”. But he had supervised the effort to make a grand production of the play – with new scenes and costumes, and fresh actors to support him – and the press so raved about its excellence that the co-manager William Stuart would not let Booth stop before it reached its hundredth performance.

The press was admiring of the beauty and completeness of the production, asserting that for the first time in America the play was brought out “with due regard to the external effect” (Shattuck 1968, 55). Booth’s 1864 *Hamlet* was one of the first successful attempts by an American actor-manager to put on an “historically accurate” production.<sup>10</sup> The acting version which Booth settled on in 1864 can be found in the edition which Booth gave Henry Hinton permission to bring out in 1866, an edition illustrated with engravings from the scenery of the play. The engravings faithfully mirrored the splendor of the scenery of the Winter Garden Theatre just before it was destroyed in a fire in 1867, together with everything Booth owned for the theatrical productions, costumes, sets, books, and props. He then devoted time, energies, and ideas to the building of a new theatre, called Booth’s Theatre after him, equipped with the newest machinery for operating the *mise-en-scènes*. Booth got Charles Witham to draw up six

<sup>9</sup> Thirty years after he died, during the furor over John Barrymore’s *Hamlet*, a group of aging Booth devotees called upon Barrymore in his dressing room to beg him stop his run of the play on the ninety-ninth night. Their ‘great master’ had played it for one hundred nights, and his record must not be broken. Barrymore pretended he had never heard of Booth’s Hundred Nights and declared then and there that he would play *Hamlet* one hundred nights plus one (Shattuck 1969, xv).

<sup>10</sup> Later followed by his 1866 *Richelieu*, his 1867 *Merchant of Venice* and many other plays.

scenes exactly as they were staged and then converted these drawings into engravings. This was another way in which he outdid Charles Kean, who had published his own acting versions without illustrations.

Three weeks after the hundredth *Hamlet*, John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Lincoln.<sup>11</sup> The entire Booth family came under suspicion. Booth wrote a letter of abject apology to the people of the nation dissociating himself and his family from “this most foul and atrocious crime” (perhaps paraphrasing the line pronounced by the ghost of Hamlet’s father) and announcing that he would retire from acting, bearing “a wounded name”. Following the assassination Booth did not return to the stage till January 1866, when he opened at the Winter Garden with *Hamlet* again, followed by *Richelieu* and, in early 1867, by *The Merchant of Venice*. Public affection for him was stronger than ever. In March 1867 another tragedy occurred: the Winter Garden burned down, and all the work of the previous three years was lost.

For the next two years Booth toured the eastern half of the country, acting to raise money for his new enterprise: building a new theatre, his own theatre. He opened it in February 1869, with a stunning production of *Romeo and Juliet*. In the audience were hundreds of prominent citizens who saw in this theatrical palace the fulfilment of their own sense of the ideal. The productions were a great attraction. The spectacular sets were made possible by innovative devices employing the latest technology. Several of the designs were by Booth himself. In all, Booth presented eight major productions of Shakespearean plays – *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *The Winter’s Tale* and *Richard III* in addition to *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar*. Several other plays were also staged in resplendent productions in this theatre with its permanent repertory company, where all the leading actors of the time and of later generations could perform.

<sup>11</sup> On the evening of April 14, 1865, at the Ford Theatre in Washington, while watching *Our American Cousin* by Tom Teylot, President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated by Booth. After shooting Lincoln and stabbing Major Henry R. Rathbone, Booth jumped from the presidential box onto the stage, where he then turned to face his audience. Walt Whitman, writing as a New York journalist, described the Shakespearean quality of the event for his readers: “Booth, the murderer, dress’d in plain black broadcloth, bare-headed, with full, glossy, raven hair, his eyes like some mad animal’s flashing with light and resolution, yet with a certain strange calmness, holds aloft in one hand a large knife – walks along not much back from the footlights – turns fully towards the audience his face of statuesque beauty, lit by those basilisk eyes, flashing with desperation, perhaps insanity – launches out in a firm and steady voice the words *Sic Semper Tyrannis* – and then walks with neither slow nor very rapid pace diagonally across to the back of the stage, and disappears” (Sturges 2014, 127-8).



#### 4. Homages to Hamlet

Soon after, in 1870, the most detailed account we have of one of Booth's performances of Hamlet was written, a real act of homage to both dramatist and actor by Charles W. Clarke, a bookkeeper and correspondent in New York. He had learned the play of *Hamlet* word for word and he knew it all by heart. He went to see it acted by Edwin Booth and was so struck by the depth and beauty of it that he went to see it seven more times. He therefore attended eight performances of Hamlet, the first was on January 18, 1870, and the last probably on March 19. He made a study of *Hamlet's* plot and characters and recognized all the variants between the well-known Cowden Clarke text<sup>12</sup> and Booth's version. He memorized the play word for word, and repeated passages to himself to test the meaning of the lines and decide for himself the correct accents and inflections. He read reviews of Booth's performances and studied every criticism of the play that he had access to. During the summer and probably the autumn too, his notes developed into what is most likely the fullest record of Booth's performance in existence. It is contained in an old journal,<sup>13</sup> written "in a minute handwriting remarkable for uniformity, grace, and legibility" (Bundy 1951, 100). He must have written the whole of it more than once, for the manuscript has very few insertions or corrections. Every scene was recreated for the reader, it was not the generalized impression of a somewhat emotional spectator but a keen record of every aspect of Booth's performance, he described the scenery, the audience and the theatre, before moving on to the setting and the costumes, as well as Booth's gestures, postures, and even his pronunciations, his rising and falling inflections. His method was to mention sets and surroundings only briefly, but to describe the appearance of Booth's Hamlet exhaustively; to report the words of other characters only enough to give Hamlet his cues or to keep the sense going, but to record every word of Hamlet's speeches and to explicate them with succinct notation of sound and accompanying action. At the end of each scene or important passage, he paused to generalize upon Booth's act-

<sup>12</sup> William Shakespeare's works, edited with a revision of the text by both Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, two prominent Shakespearean scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These volumes contain all of Shakespeare's plays and his poems. The Cowden Clarks are known for several critical texts on Shakespeare. These include *Shakespeare Characters*, *Complete Concordance of Shakespeare* and *Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*. The aforementioned concordance was Mary Cowden Clarke's greatest work. She released the work, which was begun in 1829, in eighteen monthly parts, and it was eventually published in 1844-1845.

<sup>13</sup> The manuscript is now conserved in the Folger Shakespeare Library.



ing, to interpret the broader meaning of a scene, or sometimes to enter an objection. To give an instance of his extremely thorough account, here is the description of one of the most iconic moments of the play:

Ghost enters at right rear. Hamlet does not see it, being faced toward in the right front and looking down. Horatio sees it and starts back. '*Horatio*. Look my lord, it comes!' Hamlet rouses as from some idea that had suddenly laid hold of him, and turns; confronts the ghost who stands quite near him: staggers back, raising his left hand swiftly as if to clear his eyes and by means throws off his bonnet, which hangs behind his neck as he declines: sinks into Horatio's arms at left centre, and says in a whisper (of fear) 'Angels and ministers of grace defend us!' (Ghost pauses between right centre and right front. Hamlet leans against Horatio but still stands, and stares at the ghost, breathing hard).

(101)

Another iconic moment is undoubtedly the beginning of the 'To be or not to be' speech, delivered sitting on a chair, as already pointed out earlier:

To be, or (broad sound) not (slight pause) to be (subdued, searching voice; looking down and forward, with a sad, puzzled look), that is the question (free, almost colloquial delivery, yet very sober tones; his voice falls). Whether 'tis nobler in the mind, to suffer (slowly, the voice rising a little) the sling and arrows of outrageous fortune; or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and, by opposing, end them? (he nods his head a little, and his hand slips up his temple to rest on the top of his forehead). To die? (the voice rises) – to sleep (the voice falls perplexedly) – no more (the voice very low and doubtfully conclusive; he shakes his head a trifle). And (upward accent) by a sleep (upward accents) to say we end the heart-ache (slowly and thoroughly pronounced; tone of speculation) and the thousand (slight upward accent in thous-, falling in -and) natural shocks that flesh is heir to (the voice drops in to) – 'tis is (he lifts himself to a more upright posture and his right hand gradually sinks from his temple to his breast) consummation devoutly to be wished (his voice falls; he looks upward for an instant, gives a slight outward toss of his right hand, and then brings it back to his breast). To die (tone of reflection and perplexity) – to sleep (slight upward accent and interrogatory tone; prolonged; he draws his head back a little, his brows contract, and his eyes start quickly with a new idea). To sleep! (slowly, but in an exclamatory tone; he draws back his right hand at his breast) perchance to dream – (upward accent). Ay (he sits back in the chair), there's the rub.

(Shattuck 1969, 188)

The version of Hamlet that Charles W. Clarke saw performed was perhaps the most clearly defined and satisfying of all the versions that Booth played

throughout his life and career. He studied the role very intensively and colored it with different nuances from his own experiences of life. In 1870 he was in his mid-thirties and at the height of his creativity – though shaken by strokes of misfortune, from his first wife’s death in 1863 to the Winter Garden fire in 1867 – and his Hamlet burned inwardly with fierce excitement, giving shape to a tragic pattern firmly conceived and worked out in passion.

Booth’s Hamlet then grew old with him. With the passing years the character of the Prince of Denmark became more meditative and stoical and less agonized and active. In his early fifties his Hamlet anticipated his own doom as if he was aware of the end of the story from the very beginning.

Booth’s Hamlet was entirely sane. He could break out wildly now and then, but this was just for “the very intensity of moral excitement”. His motto for the role and his answer to the question whether Hamlet is mad was that “I essentially am not in madness, but mad in craft”, as he wrote beneath an etching of himself in the character of the Prince of Denmark. To prove that Hamlet’s ‘antic disposition’ was just ‘play-acting’, Booth suggested comparing Hamlet’s mad scenes to those of Ophelia or of Lear, where the madness is real.

In his *Notebook* Booth also emphasizes Hamlet’s extraordinary intelligence, through the way he anticipates the moves of the other characters and how he decides upon any plan of action well before he puts it to work. At every moment in the play, except of course when he murders Polonius and when he is under the spell of his father’s spirit, he is in command of events. Few Hamlets have been more clear-headed, displaying so much sanity and intelligence. There was no mystery in Booth’s Hamlet, as there was no mystery in Shakespeare’s words, according to the accounts of both Lawrence Barrett, Booth’s friend and partner, and Booth himself.

In another significant review, in December 1880, in the pages of the journal *Theatre*, Palgrave Simpson underlined how in his performance Booth was no slave to tradition, constantly eschewing traditional touches. He wrote that one of the most notable examples is at the moment when his Hamlet exults after the Play scene, not waiting until the crowd had wholly dispersed, or when he utters with profound contempt for the ranting of Laertes the words “I’ll rant as well as thou”. He gave the play a new rendering, an admirable freshness and brought new feeling to the protagonist’s relation to Ophelia. Palgrave Simpson also stated that his Prince of Denmark is “grateful in his courtesy and gentlemanly in his condescension” and one of the most tender moments is when he utters “Go to a nunnery” as the warning advice of a man who really loved Ophelia, not as an indignant denunciation (Booth Clarke 1882, 73). Even in Clarke’s account we

find evidence of Hamlet's tenderness. The description of the scene following the 'to be or not to be' soliloquy shows how Booth's Hamlet changed his behavior as the King and Polonius entered the scene; in his Notebook Booth says that "he acts the rest of this scene with Ophelia principally for the King" (Shattuck 1969, 190). At the beginning of the scene he walked quickly and quietly towards her and bowed to her with gentle deference. When she asked him coldly "How does your honor for this many a day?", Hamlet was disconcerted and there was a tinge of sadness in his words to her. The hidden presence of the King and Polonius made Hamlet act and speak more bitterly and sometimes abruptly until the moment when he pronounced, resolutely but mournfully, the words "I loved you not" (192). Nonetheless, he continued talking to her, taking her left hand in his right hand and holding it to his breast. At the end of the scene he paused at the exit, came quickly down to her and, bending over, took her right hand and pressed his lips firmly to it. Then very gently he took her cheeks in his hands and looked earnestly down into her eyes. "Booth's face exhibited several emotions in turn, doubt, then tenderness and pity, then love" (196). Clarke observed that the scene with Ophelia was one of the most difficult for the actor playing Hamlet because he had to maintain the character of a cultivated gentleman and also reveal clearly the complicated motives for his actions, to show at the same time that he loved Ophelia and was suspicious of her. His mental struggle was intense but Booth's skill at playing the part of the madman was so remarkable that the audience was always made aware that his madness was assumed and not real.

## 5. The Final Years

In 1873, due to problems of financial mismanagement, Booth lost his theatre. As a result he decided not to produce plays again, but only to act his own roles, using his own acting versions. Booth played Hamlet throughout the United States, and especially in the 1870s and 1880s people came to the cities from miles around to see him. Hamlet was the role with which he was most identified, in which people loved him best. It became a national institution, a legend, in the time when the very concept of the starring tragedian was slowly fading away. Booth was, for America, the final major artist of his kind, who brought two centuries of tradition to a culmination but also to an end.

In 1880 he then toured in England, Austria, and Germany. He was following the advice of his friends, among them William Winter, to visit Europe again, though he had declined an invitation two years earlier because he did not want to be set up as the 'leading American tragedian' in rival-

ry with the 'leading English tragedian' Henry Irving, who had played his *Hamlet* for two hundred nights. Two years later his attitude towards performing in England had changed, however, and on November 6, he opened his London engagements as Hamlet at Walter Gooch's completely rebuilt Princess's Theatre. The reception of the London critics was generally judicious and polite, but not enthusiastic. During the next few days, several critics – from the *Times*, the *Morning Post*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Chronicle* – reported on Booth's performance. One found it "scholarly and intelligent", another noted that Booth occasionally fell into "artificial grooves" and showed "exaggerated vehemence" in some scenes, another again complained that he looked "as if he had stepped out of an old theatrical print", while yet another cautiously wrote that his Hamlet was "on the level" with the Hamlets of Charles Kean, Samuel Phelps, Charles Albert Fechter, and Henry Irving (Watermeier 1971, 169). It was not the kind of critical reception that Booth had hoped for, but in the long run he "worked his way out of the critical box" and his Richelieu and Lear were warmly praised and his clarity of speech was appreciated by Londoners.

In the fall of 1883, he returned to the American stage, though physically exhausted by the last year abroad and much worried about the costs of his last tour. He continued to travel from city to city for the next three years, until in 1886 he agreed to be managed by Lawrence Barnett, who organized his last three transcontinental tours, which brought his career to a close. One member of his later touring companies was Katherine Goodale, then known as Kitty Molony, a young actress who kept a diary of the season and long afterwards wrote a book about it. The spirit of her reporting is faithful to the event. Here is the account of one March night in 1887 in San Francisco, when he opened *Hamlet* there:

The audience must have been expecting the Star to walk on, for the curtain went up without a sound from the front. The King began his speech. Then the inky-cloaked figure was recognized, and they broke loose. I was in the first entrance, prompt side – where the clock was. I timed that San Francisco reception. It lasted more than five minutes ... Mr. Booth held his sombre mood and posture as long as he could, then bowed gravely – not a trace of a smile upon his face. But they – out there – kept it up, until he was forced to step out of character and wanly smile upon them ... The night threatened to become a demonstration to Edwin Booth, with *Hamlet* left out. The actor compelled quiet by slipping into character, but a *Hamlet* that made one feel as if Jove's lightning bolts had been turned loose and were striking all about one. (Shattuck 1967, 21)

From 1887 to 1889 Barrett accompanied Booth on national tours and occasionally they still performed *Hamlet*. The great actor lacked the old-time

identification with the part and there was nothing remarkable in it, his voice growing faint and his performance inadequate. On April 4, 1891, he would play his last Hamlet at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where three thousand people crowded the auditorium to see his final appearance on any stage and hear him softly murmuring his farewell speech.

His last great enterprise was to create a club devoted to actors, following the inspiration of the Garrick Club in London. When he founded the Players Club, he stipulated that in it men of the theater should associate with men of letters and with artists, painters, sculptors, and architects, because he believed that it was not good for the members of any one profession to socialize exclusively with one another. From the beginning of his project, in the summer of 1887, he started to meet actors, managers, and artists in order to show them his plans. He would give the Club everything he owned pertaining to theatrical production and more than a thousand books, paving the way for the creation of the first American library for theatre studies. The club, which would be called "The Players", was inaugurated on January 1, 1888. Edwin Booth, as its president, would give the first speech recalling that a little more than sixty years earlier his father had crossed the ocean to try to make his name in America, while it had taken the same sixty years for his son to gain the approval of that land which his father in a certain sense had disowned, bringing from the Old to the New World the roots of its theatrical tradition: Shakespeare.<sup>14</sup>

### Works Cited

- Bloom, Arthur W. 2013. *Edwin Booth: A Biography and Performance History*. Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland & Company.
- Booth Clarke, Asia. 1882. *The Elder and the Younger Booth*. Boston: J.R. Osgood.
- Booth Grossmann, Edwina. 1894. *Edwin Booth: Recollections by His Daughter, Edwina Booth Grossmann, and Letters to Her and to His Friends*. New York: Century Co.
- Bristol, Michael D. 1990. *Shakespeare's America, America's Shakespeare*. New York: Routledge.
- Bundy, Murray W. 1951. "A Record of Edwin Booth's Hamlet". *Shakespeare Quarterly* 2 (2): 99-102.
- Cabot Lodge, Henry. 1885. "Shakespeare's Americanisms". *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, January: 252-6.

<sup>14</sup> On November 13, 1913, in Gramercy Park, in New York City, the statue of Booth by Edmond T. Quinn was unveiled. The statue stands in full view of the home in which the actor died. New York had not until then possessed any sculptured memorial to the greatest of American actors or to the Bard, with the one exception of Ward's statue of Shakespeare in Central Park.

- Copeland, Charles Townsend. 1901. *Edwin Booth*. Boston: Small, Maynard & Company.
- Dobson, Michael. 1992. "Fairly Brave New World: Shakespeare, the American Colonies, and the American Revolution". *Renaissance Drama* 23: 189-207.
- Fisher, Judith L., and Stephen Watt, eds. 1989. *When They Weren't doing Shakespeare: Essays on Nineteenth-Century British and American Theatre*. Athens, GA, and London: University of Georgia Press.
- Glazener, Nancy. 2015. *Literature in the Making. A History of U.S. Literary Culture in the Long Nineteenth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Goodale, Katherine. 1931. *Behind the Scenes with Edwin Booth*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Hutton, Laurence. 1893. *Edwin Booth*. New York: Harper & Bros.
- Johnson, Nora. 2010. "Edwin Booth and Melodrama: Writing the History of Shakespearean Elitism." *Shakespeare Studies* 38: 161-81.
- Kimmel, Stanley. 1940. *The Mad Booths of Maryland*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company (rev. ed., New York: Dover, 1969).
- Kinne, Wisner Payne. 1954. *George Pierce Baker and the American Theatre*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Levine, Lawrence W. 1988. *Highbrow / Lowbrow: the Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press.
- Lockridge, Richard. 1932. *Darling of Misfortune: Edwin Booth 1833-1893*. New York: Century Company.
- Matthews, Brander, and Laurence Hutton. 1886. *The Life and Art of Edwin Booth and his Contemporaries*. Boston: L.C. Page.
- Oggel, L. Terry. 1992. *Edwin Booth: A Bio-Bibliography*. New York and London: Greenwood Press.
- Ruggles, Eleanor. 1953. *Prince of Players: Edwin Booth*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Shattuck, Charles Harlen. 1987. *Shakespeare on the American Stage: From Booth and Barrett to Sothorn and Marlowe*. Washington, DC: Folger Books.
- 1976. *Shakespeare on the American Stage: From the Hallams to Edwin Booth*. Washington, DC: Folger Books.
- 1971. "The Theatrical Management of Edwin Booth". In *The Theatrical Manager in England and America*, edited by Joseph W. Donohue, 143-88. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- 1969. *The Hamlet of Edwin Booth*. Urbana, Chicago and London: University of Illinois Press.
- 1967. "Edwin Booth's *Hamlet*: A New Promptbook". *Harvard Literary Bulletin* 15 (1): 20-48.
- 1966. "Edwin Booth's first critic". *Theatre Survey* 7 (1): 1-14.
- Sturgess, Kim C. 2004. *Shakespeare and the American Nation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vaughan, Alden T., and Virginia Mason Vaughan. 2012. *Shakespeare in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Watermeier, Daniel J., ed. 1971. *Between Actor and Critic: Selected Letters of Edwin Booth and William Winter*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.





PATRICK GRAY\*

## ***Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic: A Reply to Paul A. Cantor***

### Abstract

In the previous issue of *Skenè*, Paul Cantor, an eminent senior Shakespeare scholar, author of *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) and *Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy: The Twilight of Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), provides a substantial review of my recent monograph *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic: Selfhood, Stoicism, and Civil War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019). In this essay, I respond to his wide-ranging criticism. I have explained some of my misgivings about Cantor's work elsewhere, including not only the monograph in question, but also a review of *Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy* in *The Classical Review*, with particular attention to our disagreement about Shakespeare's sense of historical causation. What does Shakespeare believe drives changes to political institutions? Matter or ideas? 'Conditions of production'? Or religious faith? Turning here, by contrast, to different concerns, I begin by summarizing the philosophical and literary-theoretical argument of my monograph, which Cantor dismisses without further explanation as "abstruse" and "impenetrable". In contrast to a familiar but false dichotomy between 'humanism' and 'antihumanism', Shakespeare offers an appealing compromise vision of selfhood. In keeping with the recent religious turn within Shakespeare studies, as well as the revival of presentism in both history and literary criticism, I respond to Cantor's charge that I am blinded by "Christian dogmatism" and defend my conclusion that Shakespeare's Rome resembles present-day "liberal democracies". Throughout the Roman plays, allusions to the Gospels and to biblical drama introduce dramatic irony. As Peter Lake (2015, 111) suggests, Shakespeare "reanimates and stages" a "neo-Roman" ideology which is "almost entirely secular", then "tests it to breaking point by subjecting it, not merely to a secular historical and political critique, but also to a religious, indeed, a Christian critique".

KEYWORDS: *Julius Caesar*; *Antony and Cleopatra*; *Coriolanus*; liberalism; antihumanism; religious turn; republicanism

I am very grateful to the editors of *Skenè* for this opportunity to respond to Paul Cantor and to explain my misgivings about his review of my recent monograph, *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic*, as well as to concede a few 'palpable hits'. What troubles me is not so much that Cantor disagrees with me as that he misrepresents my argument, such that I fear a reader will come away from his review with a misleading or at least an incomplete impression of my various con-

\* University of Durham - patrick.gray@durham.ac.uk

clusions. In particular, Cantor omits what I myself see as the main interest of the book: a philosophical articulation of Shakespeare's sense of human selfhood, as well as the place of that conception within intellectual history (Innes 2019; Campana 2020; Landrea 2020). The word "selfhood" is there in the subtitle: *Selfhood, Stoicism, and Civil War*. But it is nowhere to be found in Cantor's review. So, I feel like I should try to explain this missing piece of the puzzle.

Is the self an illusion? Are we all just pawns of impersonal forces such as class conflict or 'ideological state apparatuses'? When I was a student, which was not so long ago, Shakespeare studies took its inspiration from French theorists such as Foucault, Lacan, and Althusser. Its professed enemy was the deracinated 'I' of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*: the self as disembodied, autonomous 'reason'. Since then, of course, New Historicism has been dethroned; such antihumanism has fallen out of fashion. But nothing has taken its place. Instead, in keeping with David Kastan's exhortations more than twenty years ago in *Shakespeare After Theory* (1999), Shakespeare studies since the turn of the century all too often has abandoned such first-order questions altogether, taking refuge instead in positivist antiquarianism (Parvini 2014). What I propose, therefore, in *Shakespeare and the Roman Republic* is a possible way forward: a Hegelian *Aufhebung* of the once-lively theoretical debate John Lee (2000) aptly dubbed "the controversies of the self".

Shakespeare offers an appealing alternative to the false dichotomy Paul Ricoeur describes as "the quarrel over the cogito, in which the 'I' is by turns in a position of strength and of weakness", and articulates it with more than usual clarity in the Roman plays, as well as Ulysses' conversation with Achilles in *Troilus and Cressida* about an unnamed book ("this strange fellow here") (1992, 4). Their discussion there elaborates upon Aristotle's description of the friend as a mirror in his *Magna Moralia*, in a passage Martha Nussbaum (2001, 364) singles out as "the clearest version" of Aristotle's argument that the independent self-knowledge characteristic of God is not possible for human beings (Arist. *MM* 2.15; Bartsch 2006, 52–3; Langley 2009, 52). Drawing on his experience as an actor and a playwright, Shakespeare develops Aristotle's ground-breaking acknowledgment of human intersubjectivity into a rich articulation of the relationship between the self and the other which anticipates Hegel and stands in stark contrast to Kant.

For Shakespeare, we are neither cogs in a machine nor self-sufficient demigods. The individual is neither a disinterested, reified wisp of untrammelled agency nor a delusion altogether at the mercy of impersonal forces such as 'discourse', 'ideology', or 'language'. Instead, as I explain both in this book and in the introduction to an earlier collection I co-edited, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Ethics* (2014), the granular specificity of interpersonal interaction, occurring at the scale of ethics as opposed to politics, complicates any larger, simpler, and more sweeping construct such as Foucault's 'epistemes'. "Other individuals intervene between culture and the subject, shaping and being shaped in turn, mediating the influence of any kind of *Zeitgeist*" (Gray 2019b, 37–8). The self is "interdependent, at once agent and object, like a partner in a dance or an interlocutor in a dialogue" (95).

Some people might find such a conclusion exciting. For Cantor, however, it is gibberish: "impenetrable postmodern jargon" (2020, 259). As Shakespeare's Casca says of Cicero's Greek, "for my own part, it was Greek to me" (JC 1.2.280).

I met with similar irritated incomprehension from the historian T.P. Wiseman (2019), who reviewed the book for the *Times Literary Supplement* and dismissed it brusquely as “conducted in the abstract idiom of critical theory”. I do not use the technical language of theology, philosophy, and literary theory to show off, however, as Cantor suggests, or to satisfy an imp of the perverse, but because it is the nature of the task at hand. I am arguing against postmodernism, both *per se* and as a supposed analogue for Shakespeare’s own perspective, and I have to use its own language from time to time in order to do so. Like Plutarch in his essay *On the Self-Contradictions of the Stoics*, my hope, at least, in citing “postmodern jargon” such as Althusser’s well-worn term ‘interpellation’ is to use the weapons of my intellectual antagonists against them. Shakespeare is not ‘our contemporary’: Shakespeare’s concept of the self is not nearly as ‘postmodern’ as critics such as Jan Kott, Jonathan Dollimore, and Catherine Belsey once made it out to be.

Another way to explain our differences might be to say that Cantor and Wiseman want to ignore Continental philosophy altogether, as if it did not exist, whereas I want to engage with one form of this tradition, French antihumanism, on its own ground and replace it with a rival form, closer to Hegel, that I see as more flexible, plausible, and humane. I want to displace ‘critique’ and give ‘post-critique’ more specificity. Whether I succeed or not is open to question; evaluating my work in such terms, however, would require first understanding what it is that I am trying to do. My aim in the monograph is by no means to advance the cause of “critical theory”, in the sense of ‘critique’ or ‘symptomatic reading’, but instead to replace what Ricoeur (1970, 32) memorably calls “the school of suspicion” with a different and more nuanced conceptual framework: a sense of human nature as both actor and acted-upon and of subjectivity in particular as both individual and collaborative (‘intersubjective’).

Cantor (2020, 255), by contrast, sees what he calls my “madness for theorists” as nothing more than a stalking horse. “He needs to wrap his book in the mantle of all these contemporary theorists because his underlying argument is so old-fashioned” (256). By “old-fashioned”, what Cantor means here is, in his own words, “orthodox Christian” (256). Cantor implies, in other words, that there is a tradition of reading Shakespeare’s Roman plays as implicitly sympathetic to Christianity that is dominant enough to constitute an orthodoxy within Shakespeare studies. As evidence, he cites two examples, both now almost fifty years old: Joseph L. Simmons (1973), who compares Shakespeare’s Roman plays to St. Augustine’s *City of God*, and Roy Battenhouse (1969), who observes that Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* seems to rely on “dark-shadowing of Christian pattern” as a form of dramatic irony. Cantor frames this association as a black mark against me, but I am not so sure. Here is Battenhouse on *Julius Caesar*, in a passage that I must admit I had never in fact read until Cantor prompted me:

The drama is here structured in terms of a beginning in triumphal entry on a holiday, then a climax with the slaying of its hero at “the ninth hour”, and finally a return of his ghost from the dead to inspire a martyr-like death by his godson Brutus . . . Dramatically its pattern of a purging sacrifice for the “renewal” of Rome – a renewal memorialized by a bathing of murderers’ hands and later of citizens’ napkins in Caesar’s blood – would seem to any Christian audience

a parody of Redemption . . . And when Antony, after Caesar's death, enlists disciples by displaying the "wounds" of the dead Caesar, do we not have a counterfeit parallel to the resurrected Christ's offering his wounds for the view of Thomas the doubter?

(92-3)

Elsewhere in his work, Battenhouse can be maladroit, forcing allegories well beyond what the text will bear. In this case, however, I struggle to see grounds for disagreement. Hannibal Hamlin comes to similar conclusions in his 2013 study *The Bible in Shakespeare*, in which he points out an astonishing array of allusions to the Gospels, as well as English biblical drama, running throughout all of Shakespeare's Roman plays. "Shakespeare spins webs of analogies in which the tragedies of the protagonists are all measured against the tragedy (if it is one) of Christ" (184).

What strikes me as misleading, then, is not so much the comparison to Battenhouse, at least not in this particular case, as the implication that this kind of interpretation of Shakespeare's Roman plays is or ever has been "orthodox" within Shakespeare studies. If there is an academic orthodoxy, it is that Shakespeare is secular, not that he is Christian. As Hamlin observes, writing only seven years ago, "perhaps because of the anachronistic and contrastive nature of Shakespeare's biblical allusions in the Roman plays, literary critics have been tentative about acknowledging or explaining them" (184). For almost the entirety of the twentieth century, in keeping with the influence of the nineteenth-century German critic Georg G. Gervinus, as well as the turn-of-the-century English critic Andrew C. Bradley, seeing Shakespeare as anything other than a forerunner of modern irreligion was very much a minority position.<sup>1</sup> "Elizabethan drama was almost wholly secular", Bradley maintains (1905, 25). Only in the last ten or twenty years, in light of the religious turn in Shakespeare studies after 9/11, has this consensus even begun to unravel. As Brian Cummings (2012) observes, "the world is not as secular as we thought": "when many theorists of the modern have abandoned the secular as an explanation for modernity, it hardly makes sense to think of Shakespeare as a secular apostle".

More worrisome, however, is Cantor's tendency throughout his review to speculate about my own personal opinion of Christianity. "Gray believes in the truth of Christianity", etc. (Cantor 2020, 256). He accuses me of "Christian dogmatism" literally half-a-dozen times (256, 257, 263). I am taken aback by this charge, and I would point out that I have never published anything on Christianity in and of itself, speaking *in propria persona*. Instead, and in deliberate contrast, I try to abide by the principle that literary criticism, as an act of sympathetic imagination, requires some degree of self-abnegation. In my work on Shakespeare, I want to keep the focus on Shakespeare's point of view rather than my own, and our two perspectives do not always coincide.

For example, Cantor claims that "Gray's" response to the fall of the Roman Republic, as opposed to Shakespeare's, is "something like: "Good riddance; those pagans deserved it" (260). But in fact, I personally ("Gray") agree with Cantor that the Roman Republic was a tremendous achievement. The difference is, I do not

<sup>1</sup> On the myth of Shakespeare's secularism see Gray 2019c.

think that Shakespeare shares my own enthusiasm. His earliest Roman play, *Titus Andronicus*, is hardly a case for the glories of Roman self-governance, and something of its wary, disillusioned, pessimistic tone persists in the Roman plays that follow.<sup>2</sup> As Cantor notes, “the Roman Republic survived and generally prospered for roughly four and a half centuries” (261). Nonetheless, that long stretch of stability is not what Shakespeare seems to care about. Instead, he writes two plays, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, about how it falls apart.

Even Shakespeare’s *Rape of Lucrece*, despite its subject matter, stops short of celebrating the distinctive political stability, military might, and economic prosperity that followed the expulsion of the Tarquins. Seen from within the confines of Shakespeare’s canon, that is, in terms of the order and chronology of Shakespeare’s composition of the works in which they appear, rather than in terms of Roman history itself, Marcus Junius Brutus immediately undoes what his ancestor, Lucius Junius Brutus, tries to put in place. The focus throughout Shakespeare’s version of the legend of Lucrece is not on political institutions, as it is in Livy, but instead on personal aristocratic competition. Rather than ending the poem with an encomium of the Republic still to come, Shakespeare introduces a long ekphrasis in the middle focused on the sack of Troy: an adumbration by analogy of Rome’s later fall.

For Cantor, the third play in Shakespeare’s “Roman trilogy”, *Coriolanus*, showcases “communication and negotiation between the patrician and plebeian parties”. Shakespeare’s admiration for the Roman Republic is apparent, he maintains, in the overall balance of power between these two opposing social classes.<sup>3</sup> Only Coriolanus is “unwilling to compromise” (262). Yet I cannot help but feel that this reading is forced. Coriolanus stands for more than himself; he is a symbol, a synecdoche, for the same kind of reckless, uncompromising, physically valiant but politically short-sighted male aristocrat that we also find personified in his English doppelgänger, Hotspur, in *1 Henry IV*. He personifies what Lawrence Stone (1974) calls “the crisis of the aristocracy” in England in Shakespeare’s own lifetime. Still more generally speaking, he embodies the political problem Francis Fukuyama (2006) calls *megalothymia*. What do we do as a society if someone is not satisfied with peaceful salutations in the marketplace? If an individual such as Coriolanus, or Caesar, wants to be more than equal? At the end of *Coriolanus*, Coriolanus himself may be dead, but the problem of *libido dominandi* that eventually destroys the Republic seems to me very far from resolved.

In short, as I explain in my review of his most recent book, the problem with Cantor’s take on Roman history is not that it is necessarily wrong, still less that it is uninformed, but that it is not Shakespeare’s (Gray 2019a; Gray 2019b, 17-21 and 110-15). Cantor, I would wager, knows far more about Roman history than Shakespeare ever did himself. Yet he is unwilling to allow for any separation, any daylight, between himself and his ostensible subject. ‘Shakespeare’ thus becomes a proxy for Cantor himself, like Socrates in Plato’s later dialogues. Meanwhile, he ac-

<sup>2</sup> On *Titus Andronicus* and the ‘pessimistic’ or Harvard School of *Aeneid* criticism see Gray 2016.

<sup>3</sup> For further arguments for Shakespeare’s republicanism see Hadfield 2005; for further arguments against see Gray and Samely 2018.

cuses me of undue deference to St. Augustine: “for him, any argument can be settled by a quotation from St Augustine” (256). In lieu of what could easily become a long digression, let me assure you that I do not see St. Augustine as anything like an infallible authority. My interest in St. Augustine in the present context is not as a ‘key to all mythologies’ but instead as a touchstone and synecdoche for one of the two rival schools of thought, Stoicism and Augustinianism, William Bouwsma (1990) identifies as “the two faces of humanism”.

To explain more fully, what interests me about Shakespeare as well as literature in general is not the possibility of corroborating my own opinions but instead the opportunity to step outside my own limited historical and cultural moment and encounter unfamiliar modes of thought. I am not trying to seize yet more grist for the mill of some present-day polemic but instead to de-provincialize myself chronologically; to travel across cultures through time in the same way that a traveler might journey to some far-off, unfamiliar locale. I am interested, in other words, in what is alien in Shakespeare more than I am in what is familiar. This effort is all the more important to me now in light of ongoing political unrest. As history amply shows, Christianity, like conservatism, is not going to disappear altogether. So, we should try to understand it.

In terms of critical method, the burden of proof, as well, seems to me to lie with those who would attempt to show that Shakespeare did not share the common conceptions of his day; that he was an atheist, for example, or a republican; that he leapt across the ages to anticipate our own; as opposed to those who assume, at least as a starting point, that Shakespeare was most likely well within the mainstream of contemporary thought, including not least Christianity, as well as monarchy. Cantor speaks of “Christian dogmatism” (256) with incredulity and contempt. But there is more than one kind of dogmatism: anti-Christian as well as Christian. “How canst thou say to thy brother, Brother, let me pull out the mote that is in thine eye, when thou seest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” (Luke 6:42) Pronounced antipathy to Christianity can blind us to otherwise obvious allusions, parallels, and influence just as surely as religious faith, especially when coupled with Bardolatry, that is, with the desire to see Shakespeare as an avatar and idealization of ourselves.

That said, I freely grant the book is not without its flaws, some of which are substantive. Most immediately, as Cantor notes, “it has too much of the kind of signposting one finds in graduate student prose” (264). The more essential problem that this compensatory symptom reveals is too much conceptual scaffolding. With the enthusiasm of a doctoral student, trying to squeeze in every new idea, I incorporate too many different abstract frameworks, beyond what a single book can bear. As a result, as Paul Hammond observes, “Some pages are so crowded with brief citations, with major figures appearing only for a sentence or two before giving way to a rival, that the threads of the argument are sometimes hard to follow” (2019, 548). “As the names and texts pile up,” Sean Keilen laments, “it becomes impossible to remember why these sources matter for reading Shakespeare, or how they differ from one another” (2020, 137).

Ten years on, I find myself of two minds about this unusual density of references. I am grateful for Keilen’s good faith effort to make sense of a challenging



book, and I take his point: “for a scholar who is invested in the idea that human vulnerability is the best foundation for rewarding relationships with other people, the extensive review of scholarship throughout this book erects a barrier between Gray and his readers” (137). I myself find it frustrating when modernist poetry such as that of Ezra Pound or the later Geoffrey Hill degenerates into crossword puzzles of obscure allusions, tantamount to a private language, and it is more than slightly distressing to realize that I fell prey here to a similar bad habit. Nonetheless, the difficulty in this case is not entirely of my own devising. In comparison to Miltonists, in particular, or Spenserians, as well as scholars who write about Montaigne, I often wish that more Shakespeareans had a better sense of intellectual history in the *longue durée*, so that my efforts to place “Fancy’s child” on the chessboard of various longstanding debates would not seem so puzzling or require so much effort to explain. When Keilen says, for example, “from my point of view, none of these academic excursions was actually necessary to make”, I cannot help but feel dismay (138).

As it happens, I have been invited to give a paper at the next meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America, “Shakespeare after the New Materialism”, in which I will address what I see as the dangers of this tunnel vision for our discipline. Following the collapse of the USSR in the 1980s, ‘postmodern’ theorists such as Lyotard proclaimed their opposition to ‘metanarratives’ (*métarécits*) such as Marxism. This loss of confidence prompted, in turn, a retreat across the humanities in general into the supposed safety of innocuous physical detail. After the grandiose, counter-intuitive claims of Foucault et al., new attention to ‘the material text’ at first felt reassuring. So, too, the names, dates, and welter of objects brought forward by ‘micro-history’.

By now, however, the shortcomings of ‘the New Materialism’ are starting to show through. The danger is, in short, a precipitous decline into deracinated, disconnected trivia: what Adorno criticized in Benjamin as “the wide-eyed presentation of mere facts” (qtd in Kastan 1999, 18). Shakespeare studies as *Wunderkammer* is unsustainable. What we need now in order to fill the gap left by the collapse of ‘Theory’s empire’ is not simply more archival research, still less, a revival of French antihumanism, but instead a re-engagement with the history of ideas, connecting the beliefs of the past to their analogues in the present. Hence my efforts in *Shakespeare and the Roman Republic*, as well as elsewhere, to identify rival traditions of thought and to try to discern Shakespeare’s commitment to one side or the other.

Complicating this endeavor is the sometime stumbling-block, sometime scandal that Shakespeare’s metaphysical, moral, and political assumptions are by no means compatible with many of the most dearly-held beliefs of almost all present-day professional Shakespeare scholars, actors, and theatre directors: in William Bouwsma’s terms (1990), Augustinian, as opposed to Stoic; in Thomas Sowell’s (2007), tragic, as opposed to utopian; in Patrick Deneen’s (2013), Aristotelian, as opposed to Baconian; in a word, conservative, as opposed to progressive. The fact that we today are so uncomfortable with even considering that prospect, that it leads reviewers not only to disagree with me, but to disagree angrily, is itself an interesting second-order problem, and one which I hope to address in my contribution



(Gray 2021) to a forthcoming collection, *Shakespeare and Montaigne: “Falstaff’s Party: Shakespeare, Montaigne, and their Liberal Censors”*.

In *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic*, I argue more specifically that Shakespeare does not represent ancient Rome as an idealized forerunner of present-day liberal democracies but instead as a cautionary tale. Cantor, a libertarian, does not like this line of thought: he complains that I “repeatedly confuse the Roman Republic with a liberal democracy” and rejects what he sees as “false parallels between ancient Rome and today’s democratic world” (260). In fairness, I can see where he is coming from. What I should have explained in the book but do not is why more precisely Shakespeare seems to me unlikely, if he could time-travel, to give the distinction Cantor draws between our supposed self-governance and that of ancient Rome as much importance as Cantor does himself. If readers are interested, I am planning to give a longer paper on this problem at the 2022 meeting of the Renaissance Society of America in Dublin: “The Tyranny of the Individual: Shakespeare, Liberalism, and Neo-Roman Republicanism”. In the meantime, to split hairs with Cantor as to whether or not ancient Roman tribunes qualify as “representative government”, a form of governance which he claims was “unknown in the ancient world”, and whether or not we today are free from aristocracy, even in what are ostensibly liberal democracies, would be I think to miss the larger point (260).

Drawing on arguments introduced by Machiavelli, philosopher Philip Pettit (1997) and historian Quentin Skinner (1998) distinguish between ‘civic’ or ‘neo-Athenian’ republicanism, which strives to bring about a shared vision of human flourishing (gk. *eudaimonia*), and ‘neo-Roman’ republicanism, which aims instead more simply at protecting individual autonomy from the threat of tyranny (‘non-domination’).<sup>4</sup> This ‘instrumental’ form of republicanism, they maintain, is substantively different from modern liberalism.<sup>5</sup> Shakespeare, by contrast, sees republicanism of any kind as subject to the same kinds of intractable structural flaws that Pettit and Skinner attribute to later liberalism, in keeping with the more controversial conclusions of present-day ‘post-liberals’ such as Patrick Deenen (2018), Adrian Vermeule, and Sohrab Ahmari (Fukuyama 2020). Like Hegel after him, Shakespeare calls into question the conflation of hierarchy with tyranny that underpins the concept of ‘neo-Roman liberty’. Social stability, he believes, requires what his Ulysses calls “degree”, including a monarch, as well as an aristocracy (Gray and Samely 2018).

Turning back from politics to ethics, the most serious flaw of *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic* lies, however, elsewhere altogether. As both Keilen and Cantor point out, I do not take nearly enough time anywhere in the monograph to explain that despite my arguments to the contrary, Shakespeare does to some extent admire and feel attracted to the moral vision of ancient Rome, including in particular Stoicism, Epicureanism, and the Senecan ideal of constancy. He

<sup>4</sup> For a more recent elaboration on this contrast see Nelson 2004. For criticism of this take on the distinction between Roman republicanism and Athenian democracy, see Maddox 2002 and Kennedy 2014a and 2014b.

<sup>5</sup> For criticism of this notional distinction in kind between (neo-)Roman republicanism and liberalism, see Larmore 2001, Spector 2003, Kapust 2004, and Kapust and Turner 2013.

sees *Romanitas* as misguided, dangerous, and eventually self-destructive, in comparison to Christianity, but he does also recognize its strengths and register its glamorous appeal. As Cantor explains, and I agree, “For all their moral failings, Shakespeare’s Romans embody forms of human excellence that have been much admired throughout history, among them courage, valour, ambition, public spiritedness, indomitable will, iron discipline – all of which can be invaluable to the very survival of a community confronted by enemies” (258).

Although it is no adequate justification, it may help to make sense of this omission if I explain that I originally conceived of the material that became *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic* as only one small part of a much larger project: *Shame and Guilt in Shakespeare* (Gray 2018a). As an undergraduate, I played the role of Macbeth at the same time that I was reading Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* and Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, and it struck me that I was encountering the same core debate in different forms: the opposition between what Nietzsche calls “master” and “slave” morality. In classics, this contrast resurfaces in the guise of the more neutral terms ‘shame culture’ and ‘guilt culture’, and I think these categories could be useful for the study of Shakespeare. Like Nietzsche, Shakespeare sees the advent of Christianity as a “transvaluation of all values”. Unlike Nietzsche, however, Shakespeare sees this “slave revolt in morals” as a change for the better.

More precisely, Shakespeare finds himself torn between two competing moral visions. He is committed to one (‘guilt culture’) but also drawn despite himself to its opposite (‘shame culture’). As Cantor writes in his review, “the conflict between what might be called aggressive virtues and compassionate virtues – roughly between classical and Christian virtues – is often at the centre of Shakespearean tragedy” (258). Cantor sees this conflict as intractable, even within Shakespeare’s own mind, whereas I believe that Shakespeare comes down in the end on one side, the opposite side from Nietzsche, the “compassionate” as opposed to the “aggressive”. As Helen Gardner observes, “Pity is to Shakespeare the strongest and profoundest of human emotions, the distinctively human emotion. It rises above and masters indignation” (1959, 60).

As illustrations of “the incompatibility between opposing forms of human excellence”, Cantor points to Henry V, as well as Coriolanus. “The virtues necessary in war time may clash with the virtues necessary in peace time” (258). In light of the work of Paul Jorgensen (1953), I am not sure that Shakespeare would entirely accept the contrast Cantor posits between “war time” and “peace time”. More importantly, I do not agree with Cantor that Shakespeare shares the assumption, associated today with Isaiah Berlin (2001), that human values are irreconcilable: what Berlin calls ‘value pluralism’ as opposed to ‘monism’. Instead, I think Shakespeare believes in a hierarchy of moral goods, in keeping with contemporary concepts of natural law. As I argue in my essay “Shakespeare and War”, Henry V in particular reveals Shakespeare’s sense of the best possible postlapsarian solution to the problem of intransigent *thymos* personified by Hotspur as well as Coriolanus, rather than a variation on the same out-of-control condition. The key to this solution is Christian appropriation of Aristotle’s concept of equity (Gk. *epieikeia*), best known today in the form of just war theory.

More specifically, as the example of Henry V shows, Shakespeare seems to me unlikely to accept Cantor's premise that "Christian piety" is incompatible with "martial heroism" (257). By way of analogy, one might cite Calvin's and other Protestants' fervent exhortations to the young English king Edward VI to emulate the warlike Old Testament king Josiah (Murdock 1998). St. Augustine in particular would not accept that Hamlet's withdrawal from the world or Henry VI's is an accurate representation of Christian virtue but instead would see their unwillingness to engage in moral compromise, to the point, if need be, of violent action, as a blameworthy abdication of their Christian duty to others, given their political station.<sup>6</sup>

What I found as a doctoral student, meanwhile, was that this project, *Shame and Guilt in Shakespeare*, was too big to tackle all at once. What is the difference between shame and guilt and by extension between 'shame culture' and 'guilt culture'? To answer this question properly requires a deep dive into some heated controversies. The idea that Shakespeare has opinions, moreover, seems to shock people. "Shakespeare's genius as a dramatist", Cantor insists, "was a kind of philosophical impartiality, his refusal to take a partisan view of things and his openness to appreciating the merits of either side in any conflict" (263). Keilen, too, balks at what he calls my "unargued assertion" that "'Keats's claim about Shakespeare's 'Negative Capability' is a misleading and counterproductive myth, disabling even the possibility of fruitful debate" (2020, 136).

My "assertion" here is not entirely "unargued", although I grant I could and probably should have said more in the body text. Instead, a note directs the reader to a separate essay on this point, "Seduced by Romanticism" (Gray 2018b), in which I explain my misgivings about Keats's well-known claim (Gray 2019b, 20 n. 79). "Human beings", I argue there, "are by nature double-minded, torn between faith and doubt". Authors write texts, not merely as a form of propaganda or manipulation, that is, as a means to persuade others of their own settled opinions, but also as a form of catharsis, airing and exorcising their misgivings about their own assumptions. "The doubt that shadows their beliefs haunts them, irritates them, and finally, drives them to create works of art, much as a grain of sand in an oyster spurs it to form a pearl" (Gray 2018b, 521).

Shakespeare, for example, dramatizes his doubts about his own opinions by embodying them as charismatic narcissists who steal the scene on stage but in the end meet with ignominy or even tragedy. After allowing proto-Romantic characters such as Antony and Cleopatra to exalt themselves to untenable heights, if only in their own imagination, Shakespeare shows them eventually crash back down to earth. The pattern is essentially that of the Vice-figure in earlier morality plays, albeit executed with much greater subtlety; a variation on what John Parker (2007) identifies as a typology of Antichrist in English biblical drama. Since the advent of Romanticism, however, critics such as Victor Hugo, William B. Yeats, and Harold Bloom tend to misinterpret Shakespeare's moral commitments, not only because his manner of expression is so subtle, understated, and ironic, compared to contemporary preachers and satirists, but also because his 'common sense' is so out

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g. C. *Faust*. 22.74. On Hamlet see Gray 2014; on Henry VI see Gray 2018c.

of sync with their own opposing sensibility. “Romantic rhapsodizing about Shakespeare tends to misinterpret the movement of his mind”: such critics are too quick to identify the playwright with characters such as Richard II and Falstaff, as well as Antony and Cleopatra, whom he goes out of his way to undercut (Gray 2019b, 186). To read the second tetralogy of English history plays, in particular, as what Bloom (2017, 32) calls “The Passion of Sir John Falstaff” is like reading *Lolita* from the perspective of Humbert Humbert (Gray 2019b, 355).

Turning back to the Roman plays, it seems to me revealing of a more general problem that Cantor does not in practice abide by his professed principle of Shakespeare’s “impartiality”. Instead, the myth of Shakespeare’s “Negative Capability” serves as a motte-and-bailey tactic. More precisely, like like Jeffrey Doty (2019), who raises similar objections to my sense of Shakespeare’s Roman plays, Cantor sees “Shakespearean tragedy” as “a protest against the limitations of the human condition”: Shakespeare, he maintains, “celebrates the heroic spirit in all its efforts to transcend human limits” (2020, 260). This Romantic take is very precisely the opposite of my own contention that Shakespeare distrusts the grandiose sense of selfhood Romanticism shares with Stoicism: a quasi-solipsistic refusal to accept the ‘givenness’ of God, the world, and other people (Berlin 2001; Nuttall 2007, 193). “The moral error that Shakespeare seems to find the most beguiling is a kind of self-absorption” (Gray 2019b, 186). Cantor is welcome to disagree with me; in doing so, however, he contradicts himself. He does not in fact see Shakespeare as ‘impartial’, as he claims, but instead presents him as committed; partisan; engaged. Shakespeare does not stand aloof from the history of ideas, by his own account, but instead can be better understood as a daring precursor of Romanticism: an early modern Schiller.

What such inconsistencies demonstrate is that the critical commonplace that Shakespeare has no fixed opinions is *prima facie* absurd. As both Hume and Montaigne teach us, thoroughgoing skepticism of this kind is in practice impossible.<sup>7</sup> What would it mean for a human being to have no stable ideological commitments? More precisely, the claim that Shakespeare is ‘undecidable’ requires a separation of the text from the mind of the author that now seems untenable: a conceit (‘the intentional fallacy’) overturned in, e.g. Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels’ influential essay, “Against Theory” (1982), as well as the work of Lisa Zunshine (2006). That said, the myth of Shakespeare’s “Negative Capability” does contain a kernel of somewhat mangled truth. Shakespeare is free from the self-righteous scorn of the satirist. Unlike his rivalrous contemporary Ben Jonson, Shakespeare does not sneer at those whom he sees as gone astray but instead responds to their plight with extraordinary empathy. He thinks, as the saying is, ‘there but by the grace of God go I’.

Given this sense of Shakespeare’s Christian spirit of forgiveness, I found myself startled at first by Cantor’s characterization of my tone. “For Gray”, he insists, “Shakespeare had nothing but contempt for the ancient Roman world” (2020, 257). “For Gray, Brutus is a Stoic poseur, Antony is a self-deluded sensualist with aspirations to divinity, and Julius Caesar is a pompous tyrant” (256). A similar interpo-

<sup>7</sup> For a thoughtful discussion of this problem see Kuzner 2016.

lated insult crops up in Jeffrey Doty's review (2019), too, when he says that I see Cleopatra as "a reckless strumpet" (769). "Strumpet", "poseur", "sensualist": I myself do not and would never use such reductive or pejorative terms to sum up these characters. On the contrary, I would like to think a more accurate description of my tone would be sadness, like Virgil's in the *Aeneid: lacrimae rerum* (1.462). I go out of my way, for example, to observe that Brutus's compassion inspires our sympathy, even though he himself sees his susceptibility to pity as an embarrassing fault, and I wish that I had taken time to say the same about Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

What Cantor misses here is that it is possible to believe that someone is making a mistake without therefore holding that person in contempt. Coriolanus, for instance, seems to me like Mike Tyson in his prime: a mix of terrifying power and inner fragility. If I had been in Mike Tyson's situation, back when I was in my twenties, would I have made better choices? Who knows? My purpose in *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic*, and I think Shakespeare's, as well, as a playwright, is not to look up or down at such unusual characters, but instead to evaluate their distinctive approaches to life as potential operating systems for our own. Should I act like Coriolanus? What is likely to happen if I do? In such an inquiry, neither scorn nor admiration enters the picture. I am not scoring contestants in the moral equivalent of a beauty pageant. What I am after instead is my own happiness.

What kind of outcome do I want in life, and how can I get there? Would it help me to enjoy life as much as possible, all things considered, if I acted more like Cleopatra? When I say that Shakespeare does not see Cleopatra's choices as "advisable", I am not engaged in any kind of moral grandstanding but instead thinking through what is for me a very practical question: whether to indulge or to resist the siren call of narcissism (Gray 2019b, 7). I approach these characters, and I think Shakespeare does, too, not as occasions for the exercise of my own self-righteousness, confirming to myself what I already believe to be true, but instead as potential future selves, shedding light on who I might myself one day conceivably become. They are thought-experiments, personified hypotheses, illustrating variations on what Pierre Hadot calls 'philosophy as a way of life' (Hadot 1995; Hadot 2020; Sharpe and Ure 2021).

## Works Cited

- Bartsch, Shadi. 2006. *The Mirror of the Self: Sexuality, Self-Knowledge, and the Gaze in the Early Roman Empire*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Battenhouse, Roy. 1969. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Art and Christian Premises*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Berlin, Isaiah. 2001. *The Roots of Romanticism*, edited by Henry Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bloom, Harold. 2017. *Falstaff: Give Me Life*. New York: Scribner.
- 1998. *Shakespeare. The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Bouwsma, William J. 1990. "The Two Faces of Humanism: Stoicism and Augustinianism in Renaissance Thought". In *A Usable Past: Essays in European Cultural His-*

- tory, edited by W.J. Bouwsma, 19–73. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Bradley, Andrew C. 1905. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. London: Macmillan.
- Campana, Andrea. 2020. “Review of Patrick Gray, *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic*”. *The Heythrop Journal* 61 (3): 546.
- Cantor, Paul A. 2020. “Review of Patrick Gray, *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic*”. *Skenè: Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies* 6 (1): 255–64. <https://skenejournal.skenejournal.it/index.php/JTDS/article/view/263/247> (Accessed 24 November 2020).
- 2017. *Shakespeare’s Roman Trilogy: The Twilight of Antiquity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 1976. *Shakespeare’s Rome: Republic and Empire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cummings, Brian. 2012. “Shakespeare and the Reformation”. British Academy Shakespeare Lecture, London, 1 May. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/2500/Cummings-Shakespeare-Lecture-2012.pdf> (Accessed 24 November 2020).
- Deneen, Patrick. 2018. *Why Liberalism Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- 2013. “Against Great Books: Questioning Our Approach to the Western Canon.” *First Things*, January. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2013/01/against-great-books> (Accessed 24 November 2020).
- Doty, Jeffrey S. 2019. “Review of Patrick Gray, *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic*”. *The Review of English Studies* 70 (296): 768–70.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 2020. “Liberalism and its Discontents: The Challenges from the Left and the Right”. *American Purpose*. <https://www.americanpurpose.com/articles/liberalism-and-its-discontent/> (Accessed 24 November 2020).
- 2006. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press.
- Gardner, Helen. 1959. *The Business of Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gray, Patrick. Forthcoming (2021). “Falstaff’s Party: Shakespeare, Montaigne, and their Liberal Censors”. In *Shakespeare and Montaigne*, edited by Lars Engle, Patrick Gray, and William M. Hamlin. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- 2019a. “Review of Paul A. Cantor, *Shakespeare’s Roman Trilogy: The Twilight of the Ancient World*”. *The Classical Review* 69 (2): 638–40.
- 2019b. *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic: Selfhood, Stoicism, and Civil War*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- 2019c. “Shakespeare versus Aristotle: Anagnorisis, Repentance, and Acknowledgment”. *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 49 (1): 85–111. For the special issue “Tragedy: Fortunes of a Genre”, edited by Sarah Beckwith and David Aers.
- 2018a. “Choosing between Shame and Guilt: *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*”. In *Shakespeare and the Soliloquy in Early Modern English Drama*, edited by Anthony D. Cousins and Daniel Derrin, 105–18. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2018b. “Seduced by Romanticism: Re-imagining Shakespearean Catharsis”. In *The Routledge Companion to Shakespeare and Philosophy*, edited by Craig Bourne and Emily Caddick Bourne, 510–24. New York and London: Routledge.
- 2018c. “Shakespeare and War: Honor at the Stake”. *Critical Survey* 30 (1): 1–25. For the special issue “Shakespeare and War”, edited by Patrick Gray.



- 2016. “Shakespeare and the Other Virgil: Pity and Imperium in *Titus Andronicus*”. *Shakespeare Survey* 68: 46–57.
- 2014. “HIDE THY SELFE’: Hamlet, Montaigne, and Epicurean Ethics”. In *Shakespeare and Renaissance Ethics*, edited by Patrick Gray and John D. Cox, 213–36. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gray, Patrick, and John D. Cox, eds. 2014. *Shakespeare and Renaissance Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gray, Patrick, and Maurice Samely. 2018. “Shakespeare and Henri Lefebvre’s ‘Right to the City’: Subjective Alienation and Mob Violence in *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *2 Henry VI*”. *Textual Practice* 33 (1): 73–98.
- Hadfield, Andrew. 2005. *Shakespeare and Republicanism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hadot, Pierre. 2020. *The Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot: Philosophy as Practice (Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique)*, translated by Matthew Sharpe and Federico Testa. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- 1995. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, translated by Michael Chase, edited by Arnold Davidson. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hamlin, Hannibal. 2013. *The Bible in Shakespeare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hammond, Paul. 2019. “Review of Patrick Gray, *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic*”. *The Seventeenth Century* 34 (4): 547–8.
- Innes, Paul. 2019. “Review of Patrick Gray, *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic*”. *The Classical Review* 69 (2): 636–8.
- Jorgensen, Paul A. 1953. “Shakespeare’s Use of War and Peace”. *Huntington Library Quarterly* 16 (4): 319–52.
- Kapust, Daniel J. 2004. “Skinner, Pettit, and Livy: The Conflict of the Orders and the Ambiguity of Roman Liberty”. *History of Political Thought* 25 (3): 377–401.
- Kapust, Daniel J., and Brandon P. Turner. 2013. “Democratical Gentlemen and the Lust for Mastery: Status, Ambition, and the Language of Liberty in Hobbes’s Political Thought”. *Political Theory* 41 (4): 648–75.
- Kastan, David Scott. 1999. *Shakespeare after Theory*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Keilen, Sean. 2020. “Review of Patrick Gray, *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic*”. *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 101 (1): 136–9.
- Kennedy, Geoff. 2014a. “Cicero, Roman Republicanism, and the Contested Meaning of *Libertas*”. *Political Studies* 62 (3): 488–501.
- 2014b. “*Senatus Populusque Romanus* against the *Demos*: Roman Republicanism versus Athenian Democracy”. In *Athenian Legacies: European Debates on Citizenship*, edited by Pascal M. Kitromilides, 69–94. Leo S. Olschi: Florence.
- Knapp, Steven, and Walter B. Michaels. 1982. “Against Theory”. *Critical Inquiry* 8 (4): 723–42.
- Kuzner, James. 2016. *Shakespeare as a Way of Life: Skeptical Practice and the Politics of Weakness*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Lake, Peter. 2015. “Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and the Search for a Usable (Christian?) Past”. In *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion*, edited by David Loewenstein and Michael Witmore, 111–30. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Landrea, Cyrielle. 2020. “Compte rendu de Patrick Gray, *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic*”. *Anabases: Traditions et réceptions de l’Antiquité* (32): 270–2.
- Langley, Eric. 2009. *Narcissism and Suicide in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



- Larmore, Charles. 2001. "A Critique of Philip Pettit's Republicanism". *Philosophical Issues* 11: 229-43.
- Lee, John. 2000. *Shakespeare's Hamlet and the Controversies of the Self*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Maddox, Graham. 2002. "The Limits of Neo-Roman Liberty". *The History of Political Thought* 23 (3): 418-31.
- Murdock, Graeme. 1998. "The Importance of Being Josiah: An Image of Calvinist Identity". *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 29 (4): 1043-59.
- Nelson, Eric. 2004. *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2001. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nuttall, Anthony D. 2007. *Shakespeare the Thinker*. New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press.
- Parker, John. 2007. *The Aesthetics of Antichrist: From Christian Drama to Christopher Marlowe*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Parvini, Neema. 2014. "The Scholars and the Critics: Shakespeare Studies and Theory in the 2010s". *Shakespeare* 10 (2): 212-23.
- Pettit, Philip. 1997. *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1992. *Oneself as Another (Soi-même comme un autre)*, translated by Kathleen Blamey. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- 1970. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation (De l'interprétation. Essai sur Sigmund Freud)*, translated by Denis Savage. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sharpe, Matthew, and Michael Ure. 2021. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: From Antiquity to Modernity*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Simmons, Joseph L. 1973. *Shakespeare's Pagan World*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Skinner, Quentin. 1998. *Liberty before Liberalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sowell, Thomas. 2007. *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles*. New York: Basic Books.
- Spector, Céline. 2003. "Montesquieu: Critique of republicanism?" *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 6 (1): 38-53.
- Stone, Lawrence. 1974. *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wiseman, Timothy Peter. 2019. "Review of Patrick Gray, *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic*". *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 August. <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/shakespeare-fall-roman-republic/> (Accessed 24 November 2020).
- Zunshine, Lisa. 2006. *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.



ELENA PELLONE\*

**Will Tosh, *Playing Indoors: Staging Early Modern Drama in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, London and New York: Bloomsbury (The Arden Shakespeare), 2019, pp. 264***

Abstract

*Playing Indoors: Staging Early Modern Drama in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse*, by Will Tosh, Lecturer and Research Fellow at Shakespeare's Globe, is an account of the conceptualisation, research and early theatrical seasons of the indoor candlelit 'Jacobean' theatre at Shakespeare's Globe. The book is in three parts, theatrically framed by a prologue and an epilogue, with wonderful colour plates showing architectural drawings and performance highlights. It is a powerful introductory panorama of the first few years of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, offering a pleasing insight to a general public and a useful point of departure for an academic readership. The Sam Wanamaker Playhouse is an under-utilised area of written research, unlike the Globe's main stage, and Tosh invites the reader to take up the questions he has raised for, although it is the first book dedicated to the new Playhouse, "it is certainly not the final word on the subject" (196). Hopefully *Playing Indoors* is a watershed moment, with more books to follow.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare's Globe; Sam Wanamaker Playhouse; Jacobean indoor theatre; candlelight; historical reconstruction; stagecraft; audience response

There is a global pandemic and theatres are under threat in the United Kingdom. The Globe, at the heart of Shakespeare performance, relies on private sponsorship and ticket sales. This precious resource may be endangered. What better moment to consider the deeper expression of research and avantgarde theatre-making that is the realised vision of the American entrepreneur Sam Wanamaker, something that can often be obscured by a giftshop-toting-novelty and Disneyland quality that the Globe can personify?

Will Tosh, Lecturer and Research Fellow at Shakespeare's Globe, has recently released *Playing Indoors: Staging Early Modern Drama in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse*, an account of the conceptualisation, research and early theatrical seasons of the indoor candlelit 'Jacobean' theatre at Shakespeare's Globe. The book is in three parts, theatrically framed by a prologue and an epilogue, with wonderful colour plates showing architectural drawings and performance highlights. Part

\* The Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham – lenavision@live.com

One is an introductory section on the “Playhouse in Context” featuring the “Origins” and “Reception” of the Sam Wannamaker Playhouse, followed by Part Two on the “Playhouse at Work”, and concluded in Part Three with the “Playhouse and Research in Action”.

Even though Tosh’s language at times is discursive, rather than critical, it is easy to understand the pride and excitement that is the heartbeat of this subjective study of the work at the Wanamaker. There is no overestimating the global significance of the research, the pure joy and magic of watching a play in the intimate candlelit setting, nor the dedication and visionary legacy of the namesake of the theatre, and the practitioners, scholars and artists that have worked, and continue to work, to realise and go beyond his vision. Tosh has provided a much-needed account of the inner workings of this space from various perspectives, and this publication on the Playhouse is a welcome addition to the discourse on Shakespeare’s Globe for researchers and theatregoers alike.

The Prologue begins as an apocryphal account of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men’s quest to establish an indoor London theatrical playhouse. Tosh is an easily accessible and personable writer and allows the audience to settle in and snuggle up to the early modern fireside drama that begins his tale. But although this becomes a very informative summary of the critical importance the Blackfriars had in shaping the indoor theatricality that influenced modern drama traditions, this book is not an historical account of Shakespeare’s Blackfriars, nor does it wish to be. This is simply a move to bring us to the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse’s complicated beginning. And by page three the book itself settles quickly in. What was the project of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse which opened in January 2014 and which is not a reconstruction of the Blackfriars in the way the open-air Globe relied on historical research for its more or less ‘authentic’ reconstruction? (The American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, Virginia claims to have the only existing replica of the early modern Blackfriars.) So, where does that leave the historical performance research of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse? In its own unique expression, as Tosh goes on to reveal.

The Sam Wanamaker Playhouse is a “self-styled ‘archetype’ of the indoor playhouses of Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline London” (xviii). Tosh gives an evocative description of this intimate theatre that, when the candles are lit “smells like beeswax and timber” (xviii). He informs his reader that the major research project that culminated in the building of the Sam Wanamaker is recorded in detail in *Moving Shakespeare Indoors: Performance and Repertoire in the Jacobean Playhouse*, edited by Andrew Gurr and Farah-Karim Cooper. The inspiration for its construction lies in the collective knowledge of early modern indoor theatres, but, as Tosh politely airbrushes, this comes “with all the scope for disagreement and compromise that such collective knowledge entails” (xix). Ostensibly, the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse is an echo of something Shakespeare and his contemporaries would have recognised as “one of a type” (xix). Tosh proposes something interesting: the Wanamaker is not a replica and raises more questions than it answers, but in its process of engaging with “discovery and recovery” (xx) it “poses questions we have not previously thought to ponder” (xix). Thus, the theatre both casts light on early modern architectural and theatrical traditions and allows actors and creative

artists to “find their own way toward a theatre practice” with spatial intimacy, candlelight and the acoustics of a timber-clad chamber. *Playing Indoors* “records discoveries made on both these fronts” (xx).

*Playing Indoors* is primarily a collection of testimonies, synthesised by Tosh, of the first three theatrical seasons that represent “the institutional memory of the playhouse’s earliest years” (xx). Tosh outlines that he will use an approach different from conventional performance studies, resolving the difficulty of capturing performance in print by creating an “edited discourse” that reads like a “virtual round table discussion” embracing “polyvocality” (xxiii). It is also an account of the investigative experiments that proliferate the life of the theatre beyond its concerns as a commercial stage. The bibliography has a full list of the interviewees. An appendix includes scripted questions and questionnaires and a link to the material archived and on record at the Globe research library.

Chapter one, “Origins”, offers a general overview of the Globe reconstruction, a literature survey of the academic writing populating the field, and the complicated stages of decisions and revisions for the plans of its ‘sibling’ Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, euphemistically referred to as an “archetypal Jacobean indoor theatre” (3, 13). That is, an ideal pattern recognisable to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, with the aesthetic focus remaining the original Blackfriars: “a composite structure that evoked a version of the playhouse occupied by Shakespeare’s company” (14). The foundations for the indoor theatre, laid during the building of the Globe, based on designs that depicted what was thought to be a small, early modern theatre by Inigo Jones, were later discovered to have been incomplete sketches by his student, replete with unbuildable “anomalies and kinks” (13), of a Restoration theatre. This discovery naturally caused delays in the realisation of the plans. Tosh describes the complex history of how, stuck with erroneous foundations, the indoor playhouse was finally manifest, including the contradictions and compromises that characterised an attempt at historicity based on uncertain evidence and the need to accommodate a modern audience and contemporary and commercial theatrical practice. Tosh outlines this “teleological inevitability” (20) in pleasing detail.

Tosh increasingly hits his stride as the book develops. Chapter two, “Reception”, considers the generally positive and evocative accounts of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse and its opening reception. With many precedents in British theatre of main houses having a smaller studio and more experimental space the addition of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse was familiar. Yet the Globe consciously avoided the hierarchy by having the two theatres run concurrent seasons (20). Circumventing the criticism hurled at the Globe twenty years earlier that it “smacked of veneration and commercialization” (22), the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse was instead applauded as dark, brooding and sensually intimate, perfect for Jacobean tragedy. Tosh goes on to ask the difficult question of how to avoid propagating an uncritical popular enthusiasm for dramatic sensationalism (35). In the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse the “critical heritage of early modern drama, and the significance of contemporary cultural politics and architectural determinism, coalesce” (35). But he points out the need to be wary of a nostalgic co-option and reification of the gender relations and sexual violence of “Jacobean *noir*”, willingly discussing the reasons for the playhouse’s “anxious relationships with the past” (35-6).

Dominic Dromgoole, programming the first season, responded to the space, allowing it to teach the creatives, and asserted that the early productions of well-known Jacobean tragedies were nevertheless “subtly radical” (36-7). Tosh gives a detailed and considered account of what the space demanded, the many tensions, and how its artistic and commercial identity were finally received and perceived (38).

Part Two, “Playhouse at Work”, commences with “‘Fair Lightsome Lodgings’: Initial Responses to the Space”. Moving away from critical reception, this section focuses on the feedback of spectators and artists who worked in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse for the first three seasons: “a user-led oral history of the playhouse’s early years” (45). Part Two is organised “in four themed chapters that explore the nature of the space itself; the specific skills required of actors to perform in the playhouse; the impact of the candlelight; and the significance of the SWP audience” (47). This section is, in Tosh’s words, a “retrospective round-table discussion” which is “the secret history the first years of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, told by the people who made it” (48).

Tosh reflects on the difficulties of selecting and presenting material, comprehensively archived at the Globe research library, for framing an argument, and admits he is not “naïve” enough to consider it possible to discount his “outer frame”, but adds he has “resisted the temptation to decipher or gloss” (48). Tosh continues to address the reader in this personal, uncomplicated and transparent tone, more suited to a general Globe readership than those interested in an intensive scholarly critique. He acknowledges working on these plays as an “embedded scholar employed by the organization” he studies means he cannot profess “disinterested objectivity” (49). Although the transparency and framework are of interest as signposts, sometimes the over-explanation, and pre or post cursory summations, feel extraneous. When allowing the creatives and respondents to drive the narrative, Tosh’s use of short quotes can seem like small cuts or intersections that leaves unsatisfied the desire for a more sustained discourse from the creatives, rather than a conclusive perspective. But it can also be rich and exhilarating to have the cacophony of voices interacting in snippets, trumping a sustained, single voice.

In the “Initial Responses”, Tosh takes us on a whirlwind tour of interlapping views on the early productions and responses to the challenges of the space. At times it is difficult to follow the plethora of names and situations, and it may require a pre-existing knowledge of British actors and the Jacobean plays they are performing. He thinks about “the size and the style of the SWP” and its intimacy yet impossibility of playing democratically to a house that is architecturally divided, with the hierarchical isolation of lesser-paying public. The sub-sections of “feeling at home” and “the impact of beauty” explicate how an expected part of the “constellations of sensations” for performers became an awareness that audiences being struck by beauty were “still acclimatizing to the richness of the room” at the opening of the plays (57). Tosh takes us on a tour of the responses and concerns arising from, *inter alia*, the need to experiment in the space with “unusual exits and entrances”, a desire not to repeat things, and resolving how to present exteriors in such a meticulously defined interior.

The next chapter, “‘Full and Significant Action’: Technique and Craft”, is ded-

icated to the physical challenges of the performer working in the space. “Voice” is one of the initial subsections, crucial to the acoustics of the space and the early modern reliance on language as the driving force for creating physical and temporal scene changes. In response to the “clear acoustic of the space” (73) Eileen Atkins declares that “anybody who has a problem in that theatre vocally should go to voice lessons” (72). The quality of the acoustics means that the space could “take a bellow” and “withstand a whisper” (72). For Dromgoole in *The Duchess of Malfi*, the “language just sang” (72). It was more of a challenge in group scenes, such as the final scene of *Cymbeline*, to ensure that spectators knew who were speaking: “It’s a visual thing”, notes director Sam Yates (75). Again, in this section it may be difficult to keep abreast of the vignettes, the changing productions and the litany of names, but Tosh has compiled a very useful appendix of a “Who’s who?” (200) for a clear and comprehensive reminder of who the creatives are and the roles they play in the productions. Apart from voice, Tosh considers staging, physicality, playing to the upper gallery, and the palimpsest nature of the creative endeavour in the space.

In Chapter five, “‘This Darkness Suits You Well’: Acting by Candlelight” (91), Tosh turns to the central defining feature of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse – the lighting. “Without question, the aspect of the playhouse which had the greatest impact on the craft of its artists, and made the biggest impression on the spectators, was the nature of the lighting” (90). Tosh details the technical apparatus for lighting with candles, as well as the powerful tool candlelight is “for the creation of space, mood and atmosphere” (91). He “analyses the practical, artistic and emotional impact of the candlelight on performers and audience members” and considers the profound effect of “absolute darkness” (92). This chapter is also divided into subsections that look specifically at “Holding fire: Candlesticks, torches, lanterns”; “The candles as ‘lighting rig’”; “Pitfalls and practicalities”; “Look and feel” and “Absolute darkness”. Candlelight is the most distinguishing feature that separates the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse from other British theatres. Tosh does an evocative job of making this section the heart of his book, the way that candlelight lies at the heart of the theatre.

The early productions experimented with reduced lighting levels, inspired by candlelight’s energising quality, its warmth and sensuality, the sacrality, the liquidness and the striking, gasp-inducing beauty. The great challenge was responding to the continual hazard of live flame in a timber structure, densely packed with bodies. Modern actors, unused to the “encumbrance of a lit candle” (93), needed to use handheld light, for self-lighting purposes, stay present in the scene with a “physical hinderance” (95), and keep themselves safe. A generous technique of lighting each other developed, contributing to the style and mood of performance (97). Directors tried to mitigate problems of a darkly lit auditorium cast in shadow by using creative candlelight formations (such as candle footlights), resolving practical issues with anachronistic solutions (99).

Tosh illuminates the complexities, possibilities and early explorations of the relatively unknown potential of the lighting dynamics. After watching shows in the first two seasons, director Caroline Steinbeis and designer Max Jones were keen to experiment with the concept of the blackout and the single flame in *The Broken Heart*, thereby allowing dramatic narrative to echo “an aesthetic of claus-



trophobic darkness” (100). But these experiments, although beautiful, were practically frustrating to carry out, because of the real time that it took to light and extinguish candles. (The American Shakespeare Center has a much more straightforward approach to their candlelit Blackfriars space. They limit the use of the candles to illuminating the plays with shared lighting, without engaging in the more daring, stagey effects that have come to symbolise the lighting choices of Sam Wanamaker productions). Tosh takes us through the various developments, challenges and solutions that grew a creative language and palate using light, liminal shadow and absolute darkness, tracing the decisions of the creatives and the responses of the performers and spectators to the multisensory experience that is candlelit theatre.

Chapter six completes Part Two with “‘You Can’t Help But Be Involved’: Audience in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse” (119), which considers audiences’ responses. It looks at “Insistent intimacy”; “Talking to the audience”; and “Preferential treatment?”, addressing the question whether an audience is “a collective entity, or a disparate group of individuated ‘spectators’” (119). Tosh again leads the reader through the challenges and discoveries, with a personable voice, of archived responses from the different perspectives of those watching the shows, remarking that in a historicised space “an audience engages with the early modern drama in a more complex way” (120). The responses capture the sympathy engendered in the multisensory space where the “intimate proximity of the action” is striking (121). But the space could also be rather “too intimate” (123), especially with its associations of the Jacobean erotic. For some spectators there was a “pleasurable twinge of watching and hearing characters suffer” and for others it “went beyond the pleasurable” (124). “The SWP’s insistent intimacy meant that audience members who did not wish to be included had a potentially difficult time” (126). This chapter is a detailed offering of these tensions and engages in other academic analysis of this period of the playhouse’s development, early modern reports of theatrical viewing, crossovers and juxtapositions, and the complexities of voyeurism in many rape, incest and murder scenes that the plays are littered with. Watching a play in Sam Wanamaker Playhouse can be exposing for some audience members who “constitute part of the stage picture” (131). Tosh also reveals the economics of that stage picture since those with the least expensive tickets are hidden and obscured in the cramped upper gallery with restricted “shit” views (134). Spectatorship in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse is “non-unitary” (139). All this is presented in Tosh’s accessible style, which draws easily on the wealth of information gathered by the archiving project at Globe research, although this stylistic illusion must conceal the very difficult task of picking and synthesising from an inexhaustible resource. Tosh negotiates this very well, offering a sensory tour of those early plays from the multi-perspective space of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse auditorium and the auditorium of the human souls involved.

In Part Three, “Playhouse and Research in Action”, the last two chapters, “Stagecraft in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse” and “Music and lighting in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse”, are a record of the “discoveries made during a series of public Research in Action workshops in the summers of 2014 and 2015” (143). Tosh offers vignettes of cross-pollinating, intensive workshops between creatives and

practitioners, in which he was involved, in a form of “theatrical ‘essays’” (144). Actors explored scenes following their own instincts together with the suggestions of the audience who were encouraged to move about the auditorium experiencing the action from different seats in order “to expand our understanding of the possibilities of indoor performance” (144). Looking at the relationship among performer, audience and architecture, Tosh considers subjects like the aside on a crowded stage, eavesdropping and concealment, locating scenes outdoors, and spatial possibilities of discovery spaces and backstage. Chapter eight asks how early modern dramatists and actors made use of lighting and acoustic effects in their indoor playhouses. The workshops cover a range of topics, including infernal music; under the stage and far-off music; locating sound; lighting the early modern indoor playhouse; lighting fades and *coup de théâtre*. Although it is impossible not to applaud the workshops, it feels a bit anti-climactic in the telling, with the sense that the excitement would have been in the participation and witnessing, rather than in the reportage. Sentences like “[e]ven for a modern audience, used to electronically-manipulated music, the other-worldly quality of live music that seemed to move around the interior of the Playhouse was powerful” (174), although not failing to evoke the essence of the experiment, do fail to capture the intangible experience of what “powerful” means. Unfortunately, this is a limitation of assessing live performance and workshops, and Tosh comes close to creating, with monochrome words, a sensory mirror depicting the reflections of candlelight, music, actors’ bodies, audience responses and genuine exploration and enthusiasm for knowledge, that must have characterised the extraordinary theatrical life of the early days of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse.

Tosh concludes his work with an epilogue, a satisfying theatrical structure to a monograph about a theatrical playing space - prologue and epilogue and three parts (acts). He positions his work as a companion volume to *Moving Shakespeare Indoors* and summarises the central focus of the book: it has “asked questions about the knowledge we can gain from reflecting on modern artistic practice in historicized playing space, and examined the challenges posed by practise-as-research when it is used to explore historical performance” (195).

Tosh’s account is an introductory panorama of the first few years of practice of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. It is a short book – some 200 pages – but enough of an appetiser that, covering many different perspectives, gives one a surprising amount of information. Although it is mostly discursive and uncritical, it offers a pleasing insight to a general public and is a useful point of departure for an academic readership that then wishes to explore their research interests in a more profound way in the Globe archives. The Sam Wanamaker Playhouse is an under-utilised area of written research, unlike the Globe’s main stage, and Tosh invites the reader to take up the questions he has raised for, although it is the first book dedicated to the new Playhouse, “it is certainly not the final word on the subject” (196). Hopefully *Playing Indoors* is a watershed moment, with more books to follow.



NICOLA PASQUALICCHIO\*

**Andrew Filmer and Juliet Rufford, eds,  
*Performing Architectures: Projects, Practices,  
Pedagogies*, London and New York: Methuen, 2018,  
pp. 235**

Abstract

The article presents a review of an important collection of essays on the relationship between architecture and performance as it has been developing during a series of recent interdisciplinary practical experiments and theoretical studies. The brief analyses of each individual essay are preceded by a theoretical contextualization, which is focussed on the abandonment of an external collaboration between these two disciplines, normally confined within the dyad container (space) – contained (action), in favour of a more fertile and intrinsic synergy. This idea of the intersection between the performative quality of architecture and the spatial design of performance is the nucleus of the whole book.

KEYWORDS: architecture; performance; space; interdisciplinarity

Until a short time ago the relationship between architecture and the performing arts was debated and interpreted prevalently as one between the container (the theatre building) and the contained (the works intended to be performed there). Theatrical architecture was supposed to provide an adequate spatial container for performances and their audiences, as well as to allow for the procedures necessary for successful stagecraft, the specifications of visibility, acoustics and technical scenic equipment, and the relationship between performer and public, including the need to divide up the latter according to social hierarchy.

Accordingly, the architecture of performance and performance itself, although interdependent, were two distinct languages, two separate elements, connected but not comparable. Clearly, their liaison has never been without a degree of reciprocal influence and conditioning, as the relationship container-contained would, superficially at least, seem to imply. As we have just seen, both structure and size of the container depended very closely on the form of the contained (the style of dramaturgy, the concept of stagecraft, the dimension of the audience). But, in their turn, those very scenic and dramaturgical characteristics tended to develop along the lines of the modalities imposed on them for the most part by the time-honoured architectural typology. Besides, seeing that this was understood ‘monumentally’ that

\* University of Verona - nicola.pasqualicchio@univr.it

is as a permanently constructed space and not as an ephemeral one, the resulting reaction was that of fixation (it could almost be called 'monumentalization') – also in the case of the dramatic genres and the modalities of staging. Thus, during the periods in which a certain type of spectacle reached the height of its development, and became 'classic', it inevitably found its most appropriate reception in the same architectural typology that it had helped to create. However, every time something caused the forms of dramaturgy and representation to transcend themselves and change, they would find the fixity of the architectural space to be an obstacle to their evolution.

The moment in the history of western drama at which this tension between architecture and performance was felt most strongly was between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was then that the profound renewal of dramaturgy and the flowering of the new artistic vision of a 'theatre of directors' created a widespread intolerance of the Italian-style theatres, which had accommodated tragedy, comedy, ballet and opera for over two centuries. This kind of playhouse had constituted not only the perfect container for all these categories of performance but had hosted the social self-representation of the ruling classes, first the aristocracy and then the bourgeoisie. By locating the theatrical event at a safe distance behind the frame of the proscenium arch thus signalling a clear distinction between the performative space and that reserved for the public, and by the social categorizing facilitated by the boxes which were intended for the showcasing of fashionable society, the traditional theatre building became overly cumbersome. It proved too ostentatious, clumsy and old-fashioned for the reformers of the theatre who came on the scene between the Symbolists and the artistic avant-garde. Some important playwrights and directors went on operating within the traditional architectural canons, while challenging the well-worn formal approaches from the inside (we have only to recall, in the case of directors, the Constructivist productions of Mejerchol'd, and, in that of playwrights, Pirandello's metatheatrical plays). On the other hand, scenographers, architects and *metteurs en scène* design (and sometimes even realise) utopian avant-garde theatres. Among the actually constructed dreams of Richard Wagner (the *Festspielhaus* at Bayreuth) or of Max Reinhardt (the *Grosses Schauspielhaus* designed by Hans Poelzig), many others remained on paper: from Alberto Martini's *Tetiteatro* on the water to Enrico Prampolini's *Magnetic Theatre* right up to Walter Gropius' *Total Theatre* for Erwin Piscator, to mention only a few.

And yet, this 'revolution', embarked on by theatrical architecture during the first half of the twentieth century, and persevered in, to a certain extent, during the second half, was not able to distance itself completely and beyond all shadow of doubt from the traditional interpretation of the relationship between architecture and performance according to the model container/contained. And this although it had established more intrinsic links with the performative event and had aimed at a structural pliancy which could foster its effectiveness as to typologies of scenic events which were proving to be increasingly difficult either to codify or to foresee. From certain angles most of the results achieved in this category seem to be inspired by a spirit of 'conservative modernization', which in reality was incapable of effecting a complete severance with the past.

However, by and large in the last three decades certain events have occurred in

theory but also in practice, and as much in the field of architecture as in that of the languages of performance, that now allow us to observe their relationship as one which has been truly transformed and to some extent 'Copernically' reversed. I have just utilized a concept, that of 'field', that in point of fact, as I shall explain below, is no longer correct, simply because it is typical of an outdated way of considering the relationship between architecture and performance. But to help my explanation, I shall continue in this way for a while as if the two languages and their practices could still be collectively placed in two completely distinct fields.

What has been happening in the sphere of the performative, at least on its more progressive and innovative margins, starting during the last century from the Sixties onwards, but with a noticeable escalation during the Nineties is obvious to everyone. Indeed, it has found a semantic container, perhaps a little too generic and thus too amorphous, in the concept of post-dramatic introduced by Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006). The most interesting aspect of this contemporary tendency concerning the performative is the ultimate breakdown of clear-cut distinctions, by now less and less effective in the description of present-day practices, of the borderlines between theatre, dance, musical and artistic performance and installation, not to mention the separation into genres of what belongs to the body, what to speech and what to the languages of the new technologies. Both in artistic practice and in the theoretical knowledge that goes with it, many barriers have fallen, necessitating an interdisciplinary and convergent vision of the languages of staging. This has not, however, made the concept of performativity more generic and muddled; it has, it is true, expanded the context, but at the same time it has redefined its aesthetic specificity in a more precise and complete manner. Among other things, this redefinition has drawn attention to the spatial dimension, previously relegated to second place by the emphasis on the temporal, thanks to the increasing disengagement of the performative arts from text and narrative. A greater emphasis, both theoretical and practical, has thus been placed on the spatial aspects of performance as constituting some of its inevitable and intrinsic characteristics; and from this derives the impulse to design and create a space with the instruments of its own language, finally freeing it from the relationship of conventional dependence on the actual theatre building. In this way performance no longer needs to be 'contained' by a specific space, but it will achieve its own space in 'collaboration' with that provided by the particular context in which it happens to take place.

Accordingly, the performative events of the second half of the twentieth century have more and more frequently chosen non-theatrical venues, electing as their 'spatial interlocutors' (not simply containers) vacant buildings, museums, galleries, living spaces, urban sites, the countryside. This trend has found a happy definition in the expression 'site specific', applied at first to the context of artistic installations, but then extended (with a degree of fashionable complacency) to the performative milieu in general. In this way the architecture itself, no longer a receptacle and even less a neutral background to the performance, has become an actual component of the event, an 'actor' that enters directly into the spatial project of the theatrical experience.

It is, however, precisely from the architectural point of view that in the last ten years a particularly significant transformation has taken place, the more so perhaps

as it was completely unexpected. This was due to the growing perception, on the part of architects and theoreticians, of the performativity innate in the discipline itself. One which was no longer about the unconditional conceptualization of space, but rather concerned an expertise in design which could not exclude the actual experience of the space itself, the movements, the actions, the effects of socialization that are produced within it. A geometric idea of space is replaced by an event-centred one, that is founded on the concept of a space-event that breaks the pattern of the architectural work as a static structure, set within itself, effective and complete *a priori*. This alternative is a work which is in constant development, continually being regenerated by the events it accommodates and stimulates, by making them a part of itself. It is a concept which corresponds in many ways to the idea of 'open work' which Umberto Eco (1989) had defined as the new working condition for the creation of the modern opus. No longer assessed according to 'normal' results, univocal and definite, it is the consequence of an 'open-ended scheme' with different possibilities of organization and actualization and able to guarantee change. This is an art based on a procedural condition which mirrors within itself the mobility of the real world, an architecture that "does not build the object, but prepares a framework for creating situations" and "contributes performatively rather than declaratively to the development of emancipated, open society" (Mrduljaš 2017, 106, 111).

With these premises, it is obvious that the relationship between architecture and performance is no longer one between two enclosed fields but is rather one 'expanded field' of interdisciplinary possibilities; and it is equally comprehensible that such a relationship no longer has the typological problem of the theatrical building at its centre. The common ground upon which the two disciplines can operate is now clearly to be distinguished in the conception of a 'living' space, one which is always accessible in an active manner by a public which transforms and redesigns it. This is a factor which is shared by a kind of architecture that recognizes its own performative qualities and also by a performance that does not only *occupy* a space, but aims at *producing* one. The fresh possibilities opened up by this renewed relationship between architecture and performance has triggered new creative and pedagogical experiments generated by discussion and collaboration among architects, city planners and performers. However, the animated response this has caused has, until now, not been the object of very much consideration by scholars and theorists, with the result that, even studies on the space of performance which are to be commended for their breadth and accuracy (see, for example, McAuley 2000) minimize or do not even contemplate references to architecture.

Therefore the publication of the volume *Performing Architecture: Projects, Practices, Pedagogies* is all the more to be commended. With the direction of Andrew Filmer and Juliet Rufford it brings together a series of important contributions on this theme. The Introduction, by the two editors, immediately makes clear that the book's intention is that of considering "performance and architecture as bound up in action together – rather than categorizing performance as a dynamic/temporal agent and architecture as a static/permanent object" (1).

It is indeed the commitment to this aim that renders the thirteen essays published in this volume, although they are on very different subjects, a coherent and harmonious whole. The underlying unity of the project is in any case guaranteed by



their shared theoretic background, based on the ideas of authors whose names come up with a certain frequency during the course of the book, and whose influence seems recognizable, as the *fil rouge* which holds the entire work together, even at those points where they are not explicitly mentioned. I am referring to three of the authorities on three successive phases of twentieth-century architectural and urbanistic theory: the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991), the Swiss architect Bernard Tschumi (b. 1944) and the British architectural theorist Jane Rendell (b. Dubai, 1967). From the first-mentioned expert the volume's essays implement the attention given to the social production of space, understood as the privileged territory of the exercise and experience of bodies, and therefore of the possibility and the reality of the social interactions which are continually both moulding and modelling them (Lefebvre 1991). Even more fertile is the notion of "critical spatial practice" introduced by Rendell, to indicate interdisciplinary experiments of overstepping the boundaries between art and architecture, theory and practice, public and private, in order to question and transform the social and political dynamics of urban spaces (Rendell 2006 and 2014).

But the real tutelary deity of this publication is Bernard Tschumi (1994, 2000, 2004, 2010), famed above all as the designer and architect of the Parc de la Villette in Paris, but also a celebrated architectural theorist. Filmer and Rufford define the theoretical core of his work with a synthetic clarity:

Architect Bernard Tschumi's work is seminal in contemporary engagements between performance and architecture because of his exploration of the disjunction between the *conceptualization* of space in architecture and the *lived experience* of space and his insistence on the centrality of movement, action and event to architecture. Since the mid-1970s Tschumi has championed pleasure, disorder and indeterminacy in his theoretical and built projects, introducing the notion of 'event' and 'event-space' to architectural discourse. (6)

The notion of event-space, which is drastically opposed to the usual definition of architecture within the categories of solidity, stability, permanence of form, is something which appears continually in *Performing Architectures* and in a way represents its emblem.

In the course of the book these concepts return again and again, but in each essay can be found a specific and distinctive variation, so that the theoretical unity in no way compromises the individual originality of the studies nor affects their diversity. In this way each of the thirteen essays contributes information and ideas which are of great interest (with the exception of the last, a brief interview by Filmer with the director Robert Wilson, rather too quick and superficial). The editors have decided to group them into three distinct sections, with the titles which are also the subtitle of the book itself: *Projects, Practices and Pedagogies*.

The first section begins with an essay by Dorita Hannah ("What Might Be a Nietzschean Architecture?"), which concentrates its attention upon a rarely touched subject: Nietzsche's ideas on architecture, and his conception of a Dionysiac space, open to the incursions of forces which are as destructive as they are creative, a space for becoming rather than for being, and as opposed to the static and passive idea of bourgeois theatre as it is to the magniloquent, narcissistic and, in the end,

falsely innovatory concept of the Wagnerian *Festspielhaus*. More in general, Hannah draws attention to how it is the whole architectural idea at the roots of western culture itself which is too restricted and constrained for Nietzsche, who sees it as the rigid crystallization of the Apollonian imposed upon the Dionysiac, which, for its very nature, is 'performative' and impossible to restrain. Architecture, then, for the German philosopher, becomes a clear metaphor for western thought: set fast in categories and procedures which effectively hinder any actual flexibility or progress within it, things which would, however, be ensured by that 'event-philosophy' for which the Nietzschean opus offers itself as an avatar.

The article which follows, "Factory, Street and Theatre in Brazil: Two Theatres by Lina Bo Bardi", by Evelyn Furquim Werneck Lima, examines and analyses two theatres designed by the Italo-Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi. If, as has been stated, the theatrical building is no longer the exclusive concern or the primary object of the theoretical attention of those who operate on the borders between architecture and performance, this does not rule out the fact that the more mobile and interactive relationship between the two disciplines may not be of advantage in the design of an actual theatre building. Indeed, it is quite obvious that in this context the design and construction of a theatrical space will become an emblematic operation, and one of great metaphorical impact, and an ideal testing-ground, in its self-reflexivity, for a performative conception of architecture. And this is exactly what happens in the case of the two theatres by Bo Bardi examined here: the SESC Pompeia Theatre and the Teatro Oficina, both in São Paulo. The planning and even the building of the two projects were thought of by the architect as a sort of 'immersive performance' in the anthropological and social reality of the respective sites. Bo Bardi was influenced by the theory and practice of the Theatre of the Oppressed by the director Augusto Boal, which aimed to make theatre a political instrument both of investigation and of consciousness-raising and solving of the social problems inherent in the territory in which it was involved. In this way her work is carried out in a continuum of performative participation on the part of the populace, who, right from the genesis of the structures, find a natural progress towards their active engagement in the performative experiments in the actual theatres.

Walter Benjamin is the main point of reference in Klaus van der Berg's essay "Imaginative Configurations: Performance Space in the Global City". The idea that the 'global city' in its entirety may represent a performative space derives in point of fact from the remarkable explorations of the city as the 'spectacle of modernity' that the German philosopher disseminated in many of his works and notes. These studies were not conducted, indeed, through abstract hypothesizing but through images originating from concrete experience, from the spatial performance of the *flâneur*, who interprets rhythms, places and sounds of the city by exploring it and losing himself in it. Certainly, the objects of van der Berg's analysis are not the modern cities observed by Benjamin (Berlin, Paris) but, on the contrary, the 'global cities', urban areas which are much vaster and more diffuse. The author considers three of these (the region of the Ruhr in Europe, New York and Dallas in the USA) and proposes to apply to a few specific architectural interventions which are in dialogue with these complex geographical realities an idea of a 'dramaturgy of space', developed unequivocally from Benjamin. The contention here is that the

validity of the various architectural interventions is to be measured by their capacity of interpolating their own performance into the complex and hybrid performativity of the new urban spaces.

From the West to India: Himanshu Burte's essay "The Play of Place: Producing Space and Theatre near Mumbai", discusses a particular architectural project which TCT, a theatre company of Mumbai, has been developing over the years in a five-acre extra-urban space. This is a work-in-progress which flatly contradicts every modernist canon of theatrical space. Aesthetic research, at least in the most obvious sense, formal originality, technological display – all are completely missing from this project, which at first sight would even seem to be uninterested in any specific functionality of spaces. The fact is that the originality of this space – an extremely evident feature – is its constant reproduction and readjustment, according to timescales that are certainly not the hurried and rationed ones of day-to-day urban life. Zooming out, the experience could be seen to recall other 'flights' from the city on the part of theatres, to re-establish themselves in spaces and at paces more natural to them, like the well-known case of Jacques Copeau and the Copiaus during the Twenties. But the real core of TCT's experience is the *continuity* between quotidian time and theatre time and therefore between quotidian space and the space of the theatre. This explains what could be seen as a case of considerable oddity, the fact that among all the various buildings on the site there is no theatrical structure meant exclusively for rehearsals. Between living and rehearsing there must be no break in continuity, not even (or least of all) from the spatial point of view. The result is "a continuity of consciousness between the quotidian, and moments of its artistically refracted intensification, the extraordinary work of creating a performance" (79). The theatrical space develops in this way through a sort of anthropological and ecological evolution of the inhabited space and it is therefore clear why "visual or plastic qualities of architecture . . . are not as important as its pliability to *practice*" (82).

"*Khor II: An Architecture-as-Theatre Project*", by Breg Horemans and Gert-Jan Stam, concludes the "Projects" section with a brief summary of a performative experiment thought up by the Dutch company TAAT (Theatre As Architecture: Architecture As Theatre). In this case the 'construction' of the show is completely delegated to the audience, who are provided with instructions both for building, with their own hands, a small pavilion in which the theatrical performance will take place, and for creating and staging the performance itself. A do-it-yourself theatre which is evidently intended to stimulate the sense of community participation and collaboration; however, without actually being involved in this, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that the apparent public autonomy might be distorted by a sort of pedagogic paternalism.

The section dedicated to "Practices" opens with an article by Cathy Turner and Mike Pearson, "Living Between Architectures: Inhabiting Clifford McLucas' Built Scenography", which discusses a play staged by the Welsh company Brith Gof in 1996 (*Prydain: The Impossibility of Britishness*). The most interesting thing about this work is that by the way of a specific example, it considers the problems intrinsic to the relationship between architecture and performance. Pearson, besides being co-author of this essay, was also one of the protagonists, as director, of the actual

production, which was the cue for a major difference of opinion about their idea of theatre between him and the architect and scenographer McLucas (so serious as to cause the company to break up at the end of this work. The collaboration between Pearson and McLucas in various site-specific performances had had very good reviews, but a disparity of viewpoints was becoming evident even before *Prydain*: “The work was moving increasingly in two directions: towards multi-layered architectural composition (Mc Lucas) and towards an enquiry into the embodied relationship between performers, between performers and audience, and between audience members (Pearson)” (94). Pearson admits that a certain degree of tension between architectural performativity and the performativity of the actors is not only admissible, but may also be a positive factor in the success of the performance as a whole. This tension, however, must maintain a balance between the two, to prevent one giving way to the predominance of the other. In point of fact, it is a question, theoretically updated, which had already been asked by modernism, that placed the advocates of a theatre which was space-centred and that considered the human element as an adjunct to scenographic performance in opposition to those who favoured a theatre whose architectural performativity (precision, coherence, structural stability) was in any case assigned to the bodily relationships between the actors, and also, potentially, between actors and audience.

Two plays put on by the Welsh company NTW, *Mametz* (2014) and *Iliad* (2015), are the subject of the article “Occupying the Scene: Architectural Experience in Theatre and Performance”, by Andrew Filmer. The first play, which represents an episode from the Great War, is “a large scale site-responsive production performed in the farmland and woodland of Great Llancayo Upper Wood near Usk, in South Wales” (114); the second is a long work divided into four parts and performed in a theatre. Although these two productions are very different both in their formulation and in their setting, Filmer brings them together on the grounds that they both build up an analysable dramatic architecture, which should not be confused with the scenographic elements, either natural or artificial, of the staging, but rather consists in the creation of situations and experiences that the spectator is going to occupy: “. . . here I want to think specifically about how the design and construction of dramaturgical environments or event-spaces can produce architectural experiences through inviting the spectator to occupy the scene” (113).

The next article, “Housing Acts: Performing Public Housing” by David Roberts, offers one of the most interesting experience of all those analysed in this volume. It is the report of the experiment carried out by Roberts himself with the collaboration of the tenants of Balfron Tower, situated in a social housing area of east London, when they had been informed that they would have to move out of their flats so that the refurbishment work on the tower could take place, with no guarantee that they could return. Between 2013 and 2015 Roberts took on the job of organizing, with the tenants themselves, a project of oral history of the building, of who lived there or had lived there, and to the resulting interviews he added a series of performative workshops whose aim was that of investigating daily life in the building, both past and present, and exploring the perception of the relationship between residents and architectonic space. At the basis of this project was the conviction that a building is not simply its walls, but above all it is also its own history, as well as that of

its residents and of the way in which they live and have lived these spaces. The conclusion reached by Roberts, his collaborators, and the tenants was the recognition of the “importance of Balfron’s social context as integral to the vision and function of the building and as an intrinsic part of its architectural heritage” (140). There was no happy ending to this: the Borough Development Committee unanimously voted for a renovation project that took no account of the history of the building and then put all the flats on sale, thus completely eliminating their function as social housing. Despite the disappointment, however, Roberts decided to continue his activity as architect more and more in this direction: “I turned increasingly from architecture to performance to develop a robust and constructive methodological approach to questions of dwelling, development and housing crisis” (141).

With Natalie Renwa’s article “Double Visions: Architectural Models in Performance”, which comes next in the book, we return to more strictly theatrical performance. Here the case is examined of architecture that enters physically into the play, in the form of miniaturized architectural models. Three Canadian plays are taken as examples of this: *887* by Robert Lepage (2015), Wagner’s *Rheingold* under the direction of Michael Levine (2006) and *Me on the Map* by Adrienne Wong and Jan Derbyshire (2013). In point of fact, the presence on stage of an architectural *maquette*, or at least of scaled down architecture, is to be seen in contemporary stagings more often than is imagined. There is no evidence, however, that before this article anyone thought of bestowing upon this ‘scenic theme’ its own place in the categorizing of dramaturgy. It must be acknowledged that Wong and Derbyshire have recognized and highlighted for the first time the significance of the theatrical exploitation of architectural models which transcends the extremely varied separate occasions when this use has been examined. Indeed, beyond the different implications the theme takes on in the three plays (autobiography or memoirs, politics, pedagogy), what really characterizes it is the strength of its semantic and symbolic significance, which renders it a sort of crossroads of functions and values, between narration and space, form and event, thus intensifying its performative and dramaturgical aspects.

The relationship between performer and space finds an unusual application in the performance created by Ward Shelley and Alex Schweder, and it is the latter who recounts this in the essay “In Orbit of Dead Man Friend”. The two artists lived for ten days on a human-sized hamster wheel, without ever coming off it. Around the circumference of the wheel were fixed beds, chairs, small tables, washbasins and porta-potties one of each on each side, the internal and the external, of the wheel. To be able to reach the object they wanted to use, the two architect-performers had to spin the wheel slowly, moving in (or on) it in coordination with one another so that each of them reciprocally counterbalanced the other. In this way, the performance re-invented daily life in an anomalous space. In order to live in it you had to modify your relationship, little by little, both with your environment and with your partner, developing to the greatest degree possible your synergic capacities. As Schweder explains, the objective of this and other collaborations with Shelley is tendentially that of “designing a building to produce a relationship between us, living in it without leaving for a predetermined time, experiencing the ways we are changing, reflecting upon those changes and the work’s meaning both among ourselves and in real-time conversations with those who visit us” (160). The performance of inhabiting, or

better of learning to inhabit, already a theme in preceding essays, those by Burte and Roberts in particular, has in this case a consummate and ingenious example.

The final section, dedicated to pedagogical experiments, opens with an article by Juliet Rafford, "Towards a Tectonic of Devised Performance: Experiments in Interdisciplinary Learning/Teaching", which returns to and develops the theme of the interdisciplinary potential inherent in a performative approach to architecture, which can also, furthermore, be reversed and become an equally profitable 'architectonic approach' to performance. The author states apropos of this: "The central notion I am working with is that architecture, as the discipline *par excellence* of space, form and order, might aid performance's internal organization and, equally, might strengthen our sense of its position in relation to the structures and spaces that condition its production and dissemination" (168). Just like the teaching of architecture, that of performance aims to show how to design space in relationship with other spaces, and in this way it necessarily comes within the ambits of geography, cartography, topology and urban studies. Rafford develops in detail her teaching methods and their relationship with architecture. One in particular would seem to illustrate the most effectively her pedagogic approach: this is a series of 'performative sketches', short improvisation exercises in preparation for the construction of a performance, that are founded on the widely adopted practice of the preparatory *esquisse* in architecture, and share with this the character of "short, sharp exercises in intuitive form-making" (178).

Vice-versa, but in the same perspective, Beth Weinstein's "Bringing Performance into Architectural Pedagogy" emphasizes the utility of a performative approach in the teaching of architecture. She starts from the premise that space is not really such if it is not used, if, in other words, it is not repeatedly crossed and inhabited by human presences. On this subject she makes explicit reference to the theories of Michel de Certeau (1984), and to his conviction that the true space of a city is not the urban structure in the abstract, but that determined by the continuous action of being walked in by its inhabitants. It is not, indeed, the city planned by the authorities, the one that can be seen from above as the crow flies, but that perceived at ground level, walked along, lived in and invisibly redesigned by whoever moves around within its boundaries. A city, then, not for the eyes but for the body, not to be looked at but to be performed. The body, and its connected kinaesthetic experiences, becomes in Weinstein's opinion a privileged instrument for the study of architecture. This new way of considering architecture brings it closer by another route to the stage, and in particular to the theoretical re-considerations on the theatre during the twentieth century. It places in parallel the refusal of the centrality of the text and the consequent aesthetic refocussing on the scenic performance with the refusal of the centrality of the planning and the relative transfer of attention on to architecture as a spatial performance.

This review was translated from Italian by Susan Payne

## Works Cited

- De Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life (L'invention du quotidien, 1980)*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Eco, Umberto. 1989. *The Open Work (Opera aperta, 1962)*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space (La production de l'espace, 1974)*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lehmann, Hans Ties. 2006. *Postdramatic Theatre (Postdramatisches Theater, 1999)*. London: Routledge.
- McAuley, Gay. 2000. *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Mrduljaš, Maroje. 2017. "Architecture as the Open Work, Ivan Crnković's Kindergarten in Samobor". *Oris* 104: 99-112.
- Tschumi, Bernard. 2010. *Event Cities 4: Concept-Form*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- 2004. *Event Cities 3: Concept Vs. Context Vs. Content*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- 2000. *Event Cities 2*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- 1994. *Event Cities 1*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Rendell, Janet. 2014. "The Transitional Space of Interdisciplinarity". In *Speculative Strategies in Interdisciplinary Arts Practice*, edited by Jane Calow, Daniel Hinchcliffe, and Laura Mansfield, 103-12. Bristol: Underwing Press.
- 2006. *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*. London: I.B. Tauris.





SALLY BLACKBURN-DANIELS \*

## A Theatrical Performance of Vernon Lee's *The Ballet of the Nations*

Abstract

Vernon Lee's short narrative piece *The Ballet of the Nations* (1915a) was written after the sudden and shocking collapse of a long period of peace that had prevailed in Europe for forty-four years. In the text, Lee studies the developing war not as it is fought on the battlefields, but as it penetrates, occupies and dominates the civilian mind. How, she asks, does the slaughter become filled with idealism? How does a war that is so obviously catastrophic engage the best in people, and reduce it to partisan savagery? A site-specific and bilingual adaptation of *The Ballet of the Nations* was performed at the Villa il Palmerino – Lee's home for forty years – in May 2019. The international cast was directed by Greek actor and director Angeliki Papoulia (*The Lobster*, *The Miracle of the Sargasso Sea*), and by dancer and choreographer Federica Parretti. My paper will consider the genesis of this project, the relationship to its original text, and the political implications of its performance.

KEYWORDS: site-specific; promenade performance; pacifism; dance and ritual; political performance

SATAN/SATANA: Welcome! Benvenuti! It is time, to re-open the Theatre of the West. Adesso, è arrivato il tempo di riaprire il teatro dell'Occidente.

In August 2017, actor and director Angeliki Papoulia arrived at the Villa il Palmerino, Florence, for a holiday. Papoulia felt an immediate connection to the house, and to her hosts Federica Parretti and Stefano Vincieri. Parretti and Vincieri shared the origins of the house with Papoulia, describing how Parretti's grandmother had bought the villa in 1936, from the estate of author Vernon Lee. Lee was born Violet Paget, in Boulogne-Sur-Mer, France on October 14, 1856 to British ex-pat parents. Her formative years were spent between Italy and Germany, only visiting England in the summer of 1862. Lee's fluency in four languages (Italian, French, German and English) equipped her with an international perspective. She was also politically engaged, an ardent antivivisectionist, a supporter of the women's movement, and a staunch pacifist. Lee took a *nom de plume* in order to be taken seriously as a writer, at first the gender-neutral H. P. Vernon Lee, which soon changed to Vernon Lee. After travelling extensively throughout Europe, the peripatetic lifestyle of Lee's family ended when they settled in Florence in 1873, and in the Villa il Palmerino, in April

\* The Open University - sallyblackburndaniels@gmail.com

1889 – when Lee was thirty-three – which would continue to be Lee’s home for the rest of her life. Papoulia felt an interconnectedness with Lee through Palmerino, finding the spirit of the place – or, as Lee terms it, the *genius loci* – inspiration for a potential project. Parretti and Vincieri introduced Papoulia to Lee’s *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality* (1915a) which had special significance for Parretti, as this brought together her own dance training and choreographic talents with her admiration and passion for Lee. From this serendipitous meeting, the project to stage the first theatrical performance of Lee’s *The Ballet of the Nations* began, ending with the production at the Villa two years later in May 2019. This paper will briefly discuss the origin of the project, the choices made in the production of the piece, and the relevance to a local Florentine contemporary audience..

### 1. *The Ballet of the Nations to Satan the Waster*

The inception of Lee’s piece is rooted in the onslaught of the First World War. She was visiting friends on her annual summer break to England when war broke out, forcing her to remain in England until 1919. This extended stay in her birth nation took a tremendous toll on Lee, both personally and publicly. It was during this period, at Whitsuntide in the first year of the war, and whilst staying with the Quaker Ford family at Adel Grange in Leeds, that Lee wrote the allegorical satire *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality* (Lee 1920, vii).

Originally, *The Ballet* was written as a polemical prose piece to be read aloud at a meeting of the *Union of Democratic Control* at a small theatre in Chelsea.<sup>1</sup> It was such a success with the members, that Constance Smedley Armfield arranged for a second reading to be performed by Lee at the Margaret Morris theatre on King’s Road, London (Brockington). Smedley Armfield discusses Lee’s recital of the piece in her 1929 memoir *Crusaders*:

Vernon Lee read [*The Ballet*] with extraordinary dramatic skill: her great desire was to have this illustrated and published, but she felt there was no chance of a specific publication at this time. We however, invited several publishers to the Margaret Morris Theatre, and they were so carried away by Vernon Lee’s rendering and the audience’s enthusiasm that the next morning three offers came, my husband was commissioned to illustrate it, and Chatto and Windus published a most beautiful volume (233).

Smedley Armfield’s husband, Maxwell Armfield, created a series of stylised illustrations depicting Lee’s allegory. *The Nation* described it as a “grim presentation of the horrors of war”, yet this was not depicted in Armfield’s Hellenic style images, but in Lee’s prose (An. 1915, 724). She vehemently believed the war to be “all about nothing at all; gigantically cruel”, “needless and senseless”, and an act that could only have been staged by “the legendary Power of Evil” (Lee 1920, vii). *The Ballet* provided

<sup>1</sup> The Union of Democratic Control was a group formed in 1914, who were opposed to military influence in government. Lee continued to be active in the UDC, penning ‘The Democratic Principle and International Relations’ for inclusion in member Charles Roden Buxton’s collection *Towards a Lasting Settlement* (See Lee 1915b).

a public critique of the war from her standpoint, arguing against the growth of patriotism, and the terrifying violence of all sides. Most importantly, Lee presented pacifism as a worthy position in the face of this.

After the end of the war, Lee reworked *The Ballet of the Nations* into dramatic form and it was published as the centrepiece of *Satan the Waster: A Philosophic War Trilogy* (1920), which was subsequently re-issued in 1930 with a new preface. *The Ballet* and its subsequent iterations were dedicated to Nobel Prize winning author and lifelong pacifist Romain Rolland (1866-1944). Lee stated this was in *fraternellment*, suggesting a brotherhood of thought that was both personal, and, rather courageously in the first years of the Great War, public. The *Theatre Arts Magazine* reviewed both authors' works in 1921 and contended that Lee's *Satan* and Rolland's *Liuli* were "the most impressive comment on the war to date" (An. 1921, 85-6). *Satan* was, as *The New Statesman* noted, a "classic of pacifist literature" (An. 1925, 718). Also integral to the text's history is the translation of *The Ballet* into French by the pacifist journal *Les Tablettes*, which serialised the work in 1917, with bold, monochrome woodcut illustrations by Frans Masereel. The dramaturgical script for Papoulia and Parretti's *The Ballet of the Nations* was developed as a response to the many iterations of Lee's war allegory. The transition of Lee's text from public performance and short prose piece during the first years of the war, to a script in 1920, suggested to the team that further modifications to the narrative were justified, in order to situate the work in the current period.

Following Papoulia and Parretti's research, and that of their team on the current critical works on the text, the decision was made that a classical staging would be inappropriate. Although throughout each iteration of the work Lee refers to The Theatre of the West, it is clarified in her notes to *Satan the Waster* that it is her wish that the Dancing of the Nations must not be viewed by the audience:

*Author's Note for Stage Managers (other than Satan)*

*(In the event of this play being performed, it is the author's imperative wish that no attempt be made at showing the Dancing of the Nations. The stage upon the stage must be turned in a manner that nothing beyond the footlights, the orchestra and the auditorium shall be visible to the real spectators, only changing illumination which accompanies the Ballet making its performance apparent. Similarly, in accordance with Satan's remarks . . . none of the music must be audible, except the voice and the drum of Heroism. Anything beyond this would necessarily be hideous, besides drowning or interrupting the dialogue.) (57).*

Furthermore, she stipulates that the "stage upon the stage" on which the Nations dance, must not be visible. The dancing Nations, as narrated in Lee's *Ballet*, is violent and bloody:

Yet dance they did, lopping each other's limbs and blinding one another with spirits of blood and pellets of human flesh. And as they appeared and disappeared in the moving wreaths of fiery smoke, they lost more of their original shape (12).

The combination of the Lee's stage directions with the complexity of portraying the violence provided a conundrum for *The Ballet's* production team. The horrific vio-

lence and gore must not be portrayed, but suggested, and this difficulty was avoided in part by the location of the performance.

## 2. Staging / *La villa*

For the production team the villa was an integral space for the performance; not only as a venue, but due to the house's connection with the text. Lee's anti-nationalistic narrative cannot be disconnected from her forced stay in Great Britain, her *home* nation, her inability to return to Florence, and to her home proper. The performance and the site-specific dramaturgy was created with the possibilities of Palmerino in mind, and despite the changes made to the structure of the work and the adaptation of *The Ballet of the Nation* into a new bi-lingual script, the connection of Lee to the villa ensured her spirit was still present.

Parretti and Vincieri had discovered that the villa and its gardens had already been used by Lee as a theatrical space – the Teatro Rustico del Palmerino – for the performance of Carlo Gozzi's *Augelin Belverde* on May 17, 1900.<sup>2</sup> The production of *The Ballet* at Lee's home then felt entirely fitting. The decision to enact *The Ballet* in the gardens of Palmerino ensured that the audience was significantly bigger than if it had been performed inside the house. The text was split into four scenes, with the audience moving around the villa in promenade theatre fashion in four stages: the courtyard, the wall, the stone altar and the field. The plan was to take the audience on both an emotional and physical journey, through a succession of well-defined external rooms.

The viewers enter the villa's courtyard through a large gate: the private space is now made public. Standing in an area of the property which must have welcomed Lee more times than can be counted, the audience waits patiently for the first scene to unfold. Two actors – playing Satan and Death – appear, and from the crowd they draw out the company of *The Orchestra of the Passions*, who will accompany the dance. Satan – from his privileged position inside the villa – looks down onto the courtyard and begins to orate to those below, like a dictator to his subjects. Both Papoulia and Parretti had envisaged an androgynous Satan, a divine being who was masculine and feminine in equal measure. Alessio Montagnani was cast in the role, due to his ability to embody a fluid sexuality. With Montagnani's seductiveness, Satan was universally attractive and thus, able to corrupt his audience on their theatrical journey around the villa. Death, played by Elisa Barucchieri, verged on the tragi-comic, and moved with reckless unpredictability. Both characters needed to be ahistorical, so production chose costumes that were utilitarian and timeless, which did not situate the performance in any particular historical period.

The Orchestra, formed by thirteen members of the artistic community involved with Associazione Culturale il Palmerino (and one beautiful dog named Tilly), are the driving force behind Lee's *Ballet*. They are the allegorical representation of the

<sup>2</sup> An invitation to the performance, currently at the Archivio Dazzi-Cini, San Marcello, was included in the exhibition accompanying the performance: *Vernon Lee e il Teatro delle Passioni: Firenze, Arte e Politica* at Accademia delle Arti del Disegno, May 29 – June 5, 2019.

emotions that drive war and violence. The three systems of human thought as defined by Freud in "Totem and Taboo" (Freud 2001, 77) are in evidence here: the animistic or mythological is represented by "Sin, whom the Wise Gods call Disease, and her classic crew, Rapine, Lust and Murder, with their bull-roarers and rattles" (Lee 1915, 3), the religious mode by "Widow Fear with her nimble children, Suspicion and Panic, playing on penny-whistles, fog-horns and that mediaeval tocsin-bell" (2), and the scientific with "Science and Organization" whose "gramophone and pianola brayed and strummed away unflaggingly" (5).

Each Passion was provided with an instrument (in the loosest sense of the word) by Death: sound designer Mauro Casappa created a soundscape from everyday items, a parmesan grater, a toy gun, wood blocks and an aluminium sheet. For the brief time the Orchestra play in the opening act they are discordant, the music is jarring and without any sense of rhythm, which is a source of delight for Satan and Death. Once the Orchestra have performed their symphony they leave via a gate in the wall of the courtyard. Satan welcomes the audience to the Theatre of the West with a flourish and waits. Papoulia's aim at this point was to allow the viewers autonomy to decide for themselves to follow the Orchestra or to remain and wait. And then, interestingly, to see which members of the audience led the way up the garden steps, and through the gate into the second scene, and which members followed.

### 3. The Wall / *Il muro*

Once the audience moves through the gate into a smaller outdoor courtyard space, they are able to take a seat. The external villa wall completely fills the field of their vision, and it is on this wall that the dance will take place, and the action shifts from the horizontal plane to the vertical. The wall of the production has metaphorical significance: it is a liminal space, creating a border around the *home* (both personal space and the homeland) and offering security and protection. It is these borders that are violated in the dance and also in war. The wall is also representative of the structures that have been built since the First World War (such as the Berlin Wall, and Donald Trump's USA-Mexico border wall) which aim to segregate and halt immigration.

In considering the staging of the Dance of the Nations, both Papoulia and Parretti had visualised the movement on the wall with the dancers both supported and limited by ropes, suspended from the walls of the Villa. The germ of this idea is the illustrations for the 1915 edition of *The Ballet*, in which Maxwell Armfield's Hellenic figures are entangled in fibres and wool (fig. 1) representing the threads of destiny cut by the Fates. Not only did Armfield's designs inspire the shift onto the wall, they also became a prominent feature in the production's design, including on the marketing materials in which superimposed red threads hang across the wall of Palmerino (fig. 2).



Figure 1. Small aspect of Armfield's illustrations for *The Ballet of the Nations* (1915)

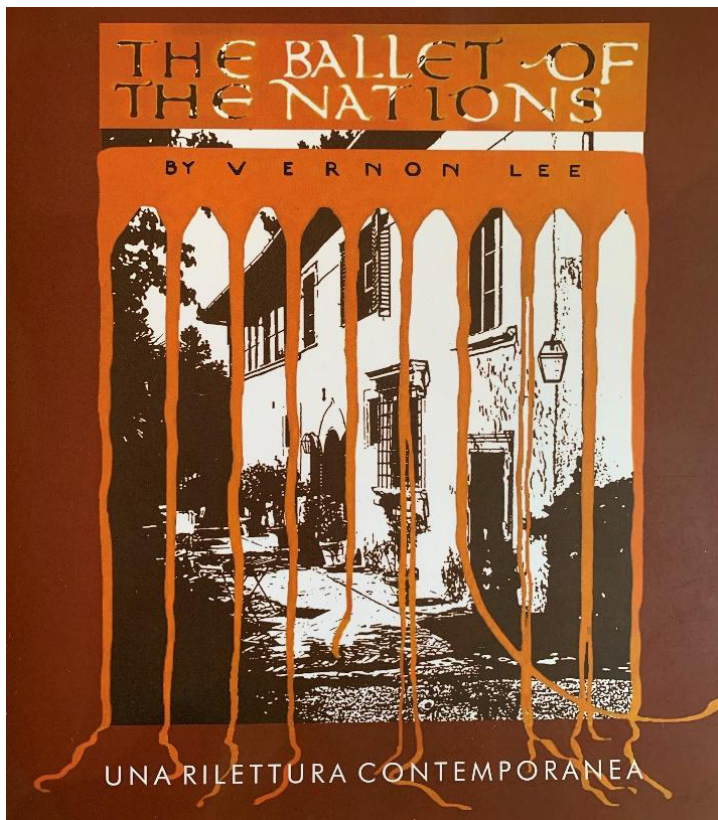


Figure 2. Cover illustration for the publication to accompany *The Ballet of the Nations* at il Palmerino. Design produced by Laura Manneschi and Paolo Zanasi.



Parretti's dance training was rooted in ballet, but she became interested in a contemporary methodology which embraced the ennoblement of primordial and natural movement: resulting in the emanation of a collective dance beyond technique and form, one linked to a harmony between body, movement and environment. Parretti's visualisation of Lee's *Dancing Nations*, built around the tenets of her own movement practice, found its echo in research produced by Blackburn-Daniels on Lee's influences: particularly, her interest in anthropological ritual and dance (87-125). Blackburn-Daniels suggests the possibility that Lee was influenced by Igor Stravinsky's and the *Ballets Russes'* infamous ballet *Le Sacre du printemps* or *The Rite of Spring* first performed in Paris on May 29, 1913. It is also possible that Lee knew *The Rite's* choreographer, Vaslav Nijinsky, as Lee's close friend John Singer Sargent had sketched the dancer in 1911. There are resonances between *The Rite of Spring* and *The Ballet*, in particular *Le Sacrifice* in which 'The Chosen One', in this instance a young girl dances herself to death in the *Danse sacrale*. *The Rite of Spring* was, according to Pieter C. van den Toorn, inspired by primitivism, a "loosely aligned succession of imagined prehistoric rites . . . to depict a series of primitive ceremonies" (1987, 3). These thematic similarities – which align *The Rite* with *The Ballet* – suggest that Lee may have been influenced by news of the infamous performance, but, like the Audience of Nations in *The Ballet*, Lee was not privy to the shocking movements of the dancers or musical score of *The Rite*. Lee was almost certainly in Italy during the period of *The Rite's* performance.<sup>3</sup> Yet *The Rite's* director and impresario Diaghilev lived in Florence, and moved in the same circles as Lee (Buckle 1979, 233, 475).<sup>4</sup>

For Papoulia, the *avant garde* style of *The Rite* was influential in choreographing the movement of the Orchestra. Whilst the *Dancing Nations* moved across the wall, the Orchestra silently, and in strict formation, travelled between and through the open doors in the wall: each member producing an individual gesture (a grab of the chin, a twitch of the head) which identified them, yet connected them to the rest of the group. The Orchestra became a silent chorus, interjecting themselves physically between the spoken dialogue of Satan and Death, and the *Dancing of the Nations* mere feet above their heads. Once the scene has ended, the Orchestra and Nations leave the second space silently. Once more, the audience must decide whether to follow, or to wait.

During the third (and penultimate) scene, Satan continues to seduce his audience at a 'garden party'. The Orchestra hand out flutes of blood-red *aperitivo* and arbitrarily divide the audience into four groups using coloured stickers. Once the scene is finished, the actors and performers make their way to an overgrown field at the back of the property, where the destruction takes place.

#### 4. Agriculture

One fundamentally important aspect of *The Ballet's* scene setting was Lee's teleolo-

<sup>3</sup> Lee's letter dated May 25 – four days prior to the performance of *The Rite of Spring* – to Carlo Placci was sent from Palmerino.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Buckle discusses the friends Lee shared with, such as Maurice Baring and Lady Ottoline Morrell.

gy of the battlefield: the transformation from late-summer ‘half-harvested field’ to bomb-pocked warzone:

For, whereas the Ballet had begun with the tender radiance of an August sunset above half-harvested fields, where the reaping machines hummed peacefully among the corn-stooks and the ploughs cut into the stubble, the progress of the performance had seen the deep summer starlit vault lit up by the flare of distant blazing farms, and its blue solemnity rent by the fitful rocket-tracks of shells and the Roman-candles and Catherine-wheels of far-off explosions. Until, little by little, the heavens, painted such a peaceful blue were blotted out by volumes of flame-lit smoke and poisonous vapours, rising and sinking, coming forward and receding like a stifling fog, but ever growing denser and more blinding, and swaying obedient to Death’s baton no less than did the bleeding Nations of his Corps-de-Ballet (n.n.).

The production used Lee’s narrative of the fertile agricultural land becoming the site of violence and destruction as a motif throughout the performance. Satan, Death, and the Orchestra utilise agricultural objects throughout, and the promenade of the audience during the play is a shift from the court-yarded villa, to the farmland at the rear of the property. The action was timed so that the Florentine sun would set behind the hills at the back of the field, and as the battle played out, day shifted into early evening. Papoulia and Parretti decided that, instead of the Nations wreaking havoc upon one another, they would destroy the field with petrol-powered hand-held strimming machines. The choreographed routine was loud and disorientating, and the audience members who were guided into the field by the Orchestra were surrounded by machine wielding dancers, the engines spewing petrol smoke, echoing Lee’s ‘stifling fog’ of the battlefield. Unlike the audience who were left ‘unprotected’, the Nations wore the correct safety clothing, including a face mask – a nod to Lee’s Nations who were “very properly helmeted” to protect the heads of state (Lee 1915, 16).

Parretti noted that at the end of the show there is a moment of great silence, and a feeling of bewilderment, which is, of course, tremendously important. Whilst the destruction of humankind is not represented physically, the fear, despair and violence are felt. Simultaneously, the sense of the ecological damage caused by warfare also resonates with contemporary audiences.

## 5. Final/e

Satan’s final line, “and thus the Ballet of the Nations is still a-dancing”, is apt both in respect of the continuing iterations of Lee’s text, and in the social and cultural contexts that make *The Ballet* resonate with contemporary audiences. Whilst we are not imminently facing warfare, the ongoing move to the political right in Western governments and the closing of borders means that Lee’s text and its message is still ongoing.

## Works Cited

- An. 1925. "Current Literature". *The New Statesman*, March 28, 718.
- 1921. "Theatre Arts Bookshelf". *Theatre Arts Magazine*, January 5, 85-6.
- 1915. "Review". *The Nation*, December 16: 724
- Blackburn-Daniels, Sally. 2019. "*The Scholar's Copy Book*" and the "Blotting-Book Mind": *Stratigraphic Approaches to Interdisciplinary Writing and Reading in Vernon Lee*. PhD diss: University of Liverpool.
- Brockington, Grace. 2017. "Performing Pacifism". *British Art Studies* 11, <https://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-11/pacifism> (Accessed 7 June 2020)
- Buckle, Richard. 1979. *Diaghilev*. London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, Ltd.
- Freud, Sigmund. 2001. "Totem and Taboo". In *Totem and Taboo and Other Works: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XIII* ("Totem und Tabu". In *Totem und Taboo, Gesammelte Werke*, Band IX, 1913). Translated by James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. London: Vintage: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis.
- Lee, Vernon. 1920. *Satan the Waster: A Philosophic War Trilogy with Notes and Introduction*. New York, NY: John Lane, The Bodley Head.
- 1915a. *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- 1915b. "The Democratic Principle and International Relations". In *Towards a Lasting Settlement*, edited by Charles Roden Buxton, 203-16. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Smedley Armfield, Constance. 1929. *Crusaders: The Reminiscences of Constance Smedley*. London: Duckworth.
- Van den Toorn, Pieter C. 1987. *Stravinsky and The Rite of Spring: The Beginnings of a Musical Language*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.



---

**25,00 €**

**ISSN 2421-4353**