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The author as gesture in Elia Levita's *Bovo-Bukh*

Abstract: The paper contains a study case on how ethics influence aesthetics in a literary work. Through a comparison of a Venetian chivalry romance printed in the late 15th century with the Yiddish adaptation of the same Elia Levita originally wrote in Padua in 1507, and then published in Isny, Württemberg in 1541, several differing points are undelined which mirror differences in the relative ethical frameworks of reference. While the characters and the main storyline are substantially the same in both works, the different details in the unfolding of the plot of the Yiddish version show that Levita wrote for a public who shared a different axiology, that is he authored a totally new romance, performing in accordance with the ethical system which his potential readers referred to. This 'gesture' in the classical Latin sense of representing a moral background while issuing a literary work carries along both a syncretistic approach to religion and an attitude more respectful of gender equality than the Venetian original does.

Keywords: Bovo-Bukh, Buovo d'Antona, Yiddish-Taytsh, performative authoring, normative framework

The Matter at Hand

The phrase 'author as gesture' appeared in a late English translation[1] of Giorgio Agamben's collected essays *Profanazioni*, first published in their Italian original in 2005. The English word renders the hypercodified intertextuality of the Italian original but partially, as 'gesture' carries, in the common language, a meaning which can be assessed as close to 'deed,' that is a single action or, better, interaction by

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[1] G. Agamben, *Profanations*, transl. J. Fort, New York 2007, p. 61–72.

a subject with their environment. The issue is by no means limited to English only. As an example, the German translation,[2] *Der Autor als Geste,* can be pointed to, with the word *Geste* to be considered as a synonym for *Tat,* that is, once more, 'deed.' In both cases, the verb 'do' (*tun* in German) is involved.

Meanwhile, the Italian *gesto* is only partially related to 'doing' a given thing. To some extent, the word still retains the original Latin meaning as a participle of *gĕro*, that is 'bear,' implicitly a symbol of power (*gerere regis insigne*, as of Virgil) or belonging (*personam civitatis gerere*, as of Cicero), and therefore refers to 'acting in the capacity of,' or 'represent,' an institution. An example of the relative phraseology can be found in Cicero's sentence: *qui in gestu peccavit non existimatur nescire gestum*, as of *De Oratore* I, 125. "He who made a false move cannot be deemed to ignore the rules [of mimicry]." Therefore, as a substantive, *gĕstus* can point to a single act, but more so — to a set of rules of behaviour. The use of the Italian word *gesto* in Agamben's essay is of consequence with the Latin meaning – when r e a l individuals author a work, they p e r f o r m according to a set of rules, be it that they abide by them, or they subvert the same. Authoring is, in itself, performative.

Agamben's position is no absolute novelty, which he is well aware of. His references to Michel Foucault's work are many and near between. For the purpose of this paper, the very concept of the author as performer, or representative, of a given set of rules is nevertheless fundamental. In the paper, I intend to prove, though not in an exhaustive fashion, that Elia Levita's *Bovo-Bukh* is much more than an adaptation of the anonymous Venetian incunable it was inspired by. By writing his Yiddish romance, Levita authored a new poem instead. Albeit the characters and, to a huge extent, the story itself appear to be common to both works, the effort Levita put in bringing the narration into a reference system which the Jewish addressees would find acceptable, and possibly appreciate, is evidence of an authoring performance in the sense above. That, in its turn, is mirrored in the narrative techniques Levita adopted, thus raising the question of how ethics influence aesthetics.

Sources and Exegetic Issues

The work of reference is known as *Bovo-Bukh*. It was first published in print in Isny, close to the Bavarian border in the southernmost part of today's Württemberg, in 1541. This early edition was printed in what was called *ksivo ktono*, or 'small font,' a cursive of sorts which was also defined as *kurrent Schrift* in Middle-High-German. The rules concerning *hebræas litteras teutonice legendas*, that is 'the Hebrew letters to be read in German,' or the alphabet in use for transcribing Yiddish-Taytsh,[3] would be codified by rev. Paulus Fagius but in 1543, although they had been applied for decades already. Fagius assessed that *scriptura assyr-*

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    [2] G. Agamben, *Profanierungen*, transl. M. Schneider, Frankfurt 2005, p. 57–69.
    [3] Yiddish-Taytsh, or 'Jewish German,' was the vernacular language in use with the German Jews until the early 16th century. The name is meant to underscore its substantial differences from modern Yiddish, in which Slavic influences and a larger number of Hebraisms are present instead.

ica, or the square font used to print Biblical and Talmudic texts, was reserved for *loshn koydesh*, the 'holy language' of Rabbinic Hebrew, whereas said 'small font' was right and proper for vernacular utterances.[4]

The issue of which font ought to be chosen for printing which text points once more to the performative character of authoring. With no regard whatsoever to the author in the sense of the individual delivering a speech, but considering the author as the unifying principle in a given set of statements,[5] coherence must be maintained from the beginning to the very end. Since the author function, whether patent as in fiction, or located at the edges of the text as in exegetic commentaries to sacred writs, is always "characteristic of the [...] functioning of certain discourses within a society," as M. Foucault noticed,[6] the author's *gĕstus* must be of consequence with such functioning. In spite of M. Foucault's conceptual opposition between the author as individual and the author function, Levita was also responsible for the editing and the page layout of whatever Fagius' printing house in Isny issued. Therefore, in Levita's case, consequence included the physical looks of the printed word.

Bovo-Bukh was to become definitely popular in Yiddish culture for a long time. A number of adaptations appeared throughout Europe well into the 18th century, an abridged version in modern Yiddish was also published in New York in 1950,[7] and still another adaptation was issued for the series "Musterverk fun der yidisher literatur" as late as in 1962.[8] The relative changes, both in the language and in the story itself, are worth a separate study addressing the issue of how a given discourse is modified depending on the traits of the society it is meant to function in. For the purpose of the present paper, it suffices to briefly recall which European adaptations have been known to date.

As Claudia Rosenzweig reconstructed in her latest critical edition, after 1541 *Bovo-Bukh* was published in Amsterdam in the first half of 17th century, then in Prague in 1660, once more in Amsterdam in 1661, in Frankfurt in 1691, again in Amsterdam in 1721, in Wilhelmsdorf near Berlin in 1724, and again in Prague in 1740 and 1767.[9] Besides, another ten editions appeared in Vilnius between 1824 and 1909, as Rita Greve ascertained.[10] So many adaptations in so vast a timespan are proof of the vitality of the plot regardless of the narrative transformations it underwent. That is still more remarkable if we accept the widespread postulate that, among educated Jews until the late 19th century, Yiddish had but the status of *mame-loshn*, 'mother's idiolect.' It was allegedly considered to be but a vernacular language, undoubtedly useful in everyday's interaction in mundane matters, yet hardly suited to refined literary production. Meanwhile, the popularity both *Bovo-Bukh*

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[4] J. Baumgarten, *Introduction à la littérature yiddish ancienne*, Paris 2004, p. 9–10.

[5] Cf. M. Foucault, *L'ordre du discours*, Paris 1971.

[6] Quoted in: G. Agamben, *Profanations*, p. 62.

[7] N.B. Minkoff, *Elye Bokher un zayn Bovo-Bukh*, New York 1950.

[8] E. Bokher, *Bovo-Bukh*, adapt. from Old Yiddish by M. Knapheys, Sh. Rozhanski (ed.), Buenos Aires 1962.

[9] *Bovo d'Antona by Elye Bokher: A Yiddish Romance*, C. Rosenzweig (ed.), Leiden 2015, p. 504.

[10] R. Greve, *Studien über den Roman Buovo d'Antona in Rußland*, Berlin 1956.

and a few other Yiddish works of fiction enjoyed contradicts the *mame-loshn* postulate, instead showing its fundamentally ideological nature in spite of hard facts.

The postulate, as Jerold C. Frakes states, derives from "cultural prejudices [which] have so ingrained and integrated themselves into the institutions and thereby the education and thus the mentality of scholars [...] that the initially quite obviously ideological claims have in the course of time been reified, taken on the appearance of fact, datum, and information."[11] What the history of the reception of *Bovo-Bukh* among educated, as they could read poetry, and supposedly affluent, as they could afford to purchase costly editions, European Jews shows is that Yiddish was far from representing a mere 'mother's idiolect,' but it had an undisputed status of literary language and, as such, it also had its own *gĕstum*, a set of rules authors were supposed to keep in mind while performing their authoring.

Meanwhile, the 1541 original was lost. It was only a forefather of modern Yiddish linguistics, Max Weinreich, who found a copy at the Central Library of Zurich in 1931. The photographic copy he carefully made remained unused in the harsh period Europe was going through at the time, nevertheless it did survive the Shoah. In 1949, Judah A. Joffe would reprint Levita's original *Bovo-Bukh* in a critical edition.[12]

J.A. Joffe's anastatic reprint will be the edition of reference throughout the present paper. One other document is neverthess fundamental for the sake of philological accuracy. As Levita openly stated in the foreword, his romance was an adaptation of a *velsh bukh* (see below for a tentative explanation of the phrase) which he originally made 34 years earlier, that is in 1507. At that time, he probably lived in Padua.[13]

For a long time, the only manuscript draft preceding the 1541 edition was supposed to be the fragment contained in a codex extant the National Library in Paris.[14] Later research led to recover a still earlier manuscript which had long been deemed lost during World War II.[15] This latter manuscript, which belonged to one Natan bar Yehiel Zinl a.k.a. Kerfil Vintrits, and is now at the National Library of Jerusalem,[16] carries no date. Nevertheless, a few elements allow to postulate that it was written in Italy. Being a bound notebook of sorts, it contains memoranda beside an early draft of the romance. Among them, the beginning of a letter in poor Italian belongs. Moreover, the spelling of the Yiddish text substantially differs from the orthography found in the 1541 print, showing Italkian (Judeo-Italian) influences. Loanwords from Venetian are also present. They can be identified thanks to *nikud*, which is otherwise absent in the Yiddish text. The Vintrits manuscript can

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[11] J.C. Frakes, *The Politics of Interpretation: Alterity and Ideology in Old Yiddish Studies*, New York 1989, p. VII–VIII.

[12] *Elye Bokher: Poetishe shafungen in yiddish. Ershter band: Reproduktsye fun der ershter oysgabe Bovo Dantona, Eyzne 1541*, J.A. Joffe (ed.), New York 1949.

[13] I. Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, B. Martin (ed.), vol. IV. *Italian Jewry in the Renaissance Era*, Cincinnati 1974, p. 44.

[14] Bibliothéque Nationale, Hébreu 750, fos. 123–157.

[15] See *Early Yiddish Texts 1100–1750*, J.C. Frakes (ed.), Oxford 2004, p. 121.

[16] National Library of Jerusalem, JER NLI 7565=8.

therefore be considered to be the original draft of *Bovo-Bukh*, for the purposes of the present paper at least.

The adaptation of an 'Italian book'?

Contemporary scholars have translated the adjective *velsh* in use with Levita as "Italian." The word has indeed had this meaning since modern times. Such translation can be found both in poet and literary historian Nokhem B. Minkoff's abridged summary,[17] and in M. Knapheys's adaptation.[18] Though their statements are doubtlessly authoritative, they might suffer from the ideological nature of the postulate about *mame-loshn*, as seen above. Should we not take for granted that, in 16th century's western Europe, Yiddish was but a jargon transmitted through generations like a family heirloom, as it was to become later in Poland and Russia, but it was a fully entitled literary language instead, we also ought to acknowledge its permeability to the surrounding Gentile vernaculars. Therefore, the later semantics of words does not necessarily mirror what those words meant in the beginning.

Now, if we take a diachronic approach, we can ascertain that in Middle-High-German the adjective *walhisch*, usually metaphonized into *wälhisch*, with a later contraption as *walsch*, *wälsch*, or *welsch*, meant both "Italian" and "French," that is, it pointed to some undefined Romance language as opposed to Germanic ones.[19] That is probably the original meaning of Levita's definition, whence we can by no means infer that the book was Italian in actuality.

The romance of Buovo d'Antona, as it came to be known in Italy, had a French origin. The early manuscripts about Beuve de Hanstone are to be dated back to 12th century. The story then wandered into northen Italy, where it was rewritten in several mixed vernaculars, until it appeared also in Bologna in the late 1490s.

According to J.A. Joffe, the only possible original story Levita was inspired by was contained in an incunable which appeared in Bologna in 1497, authored by one Guido Palladino.[20] The hypothesis is far from convincing nowadays, as J.C. Frakes commented too.[21] A structural analysis of G. Palladino's work shows his romance to consist of nearly fifteen hundred lines, subdivided into 22 cantos, whereas *Bovo-Bukh* is composed of 650 stanzas only.

More recent research in Italy has proved that a number of inclunables were printed earlier. The oldest one was also printed in Bologna, but in 1480. The publisher was one Bazaliero de' Bazalieri, brother to Caligula, that is the publisher of

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[17] N.B. Minkoff, *Elye Bokher un zayn Bovo-Bukh*, p. 59. The essay contains but one chapter titled *Inhalt fun Bovo-Bukh*, in which only selected fragments of the original are transcribed with alternative, contemporary Yiddish words in brackets.

[18] E. Bokher, *Bovo-Bukh*, p. 220. The translation is to be found in a sort of final glossary in which the original words are defined as *taytshn*, see above for a definition thereof.

[19] *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm*, digitalised edition in: Wörterbuchnetz des Trier Center for Digital Humanities, Version 01/21, https://www.woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB (accessed: 24.07.2021).

[20] *Elye Bokher: Poetishe shafungen in yiddish*, p. 25.

[21] *Early Yiddish Epic*, transl. J.C. Frakes, Syracuse 2014, p. 445.

the 1497 Palladino edition.[22] This early incunable, though, presents a low quality of print, along with many a typo, which makes it unsuitable for philology work. In fact, one of the latest critical editions of *Buovo d'Antona* is based on still another incunable, printed in Venice in 1489 by Bernardino de' Cori, albeit this later version contains thirteen more stanzas than the 1480 one.[23] Still, several other versions were printed before the 1489 de' Cori edition, which are much more similar to the 1480 original. For the purpose of this paper, an incunable published in Venice in 1487 will be held as the version of reference.[24]

Levita's *velsh bukh*, therefore, was Italian only in the sense it was printed in a place which lies in today's Italy, whether it was Bologna or Venice. The story came from northern France, and the language carries patent Venetian traits, so that Levita felt compelled to attach a glossary at the end of the 1541 print. Thanks to the vowel notation in the foreign, that is not-Yiddish words, the (mostly) Venetian origin of the same is easily confirmed, though a few of them seem to present other traits, probably Tuscan. The assumption behind this observation is that the *nikud* Levita uses is consequent with the vowel notation in his scholarly works, that is, it represents the sounds of Rabbinic Hebrew, and not today's Yiddish.

That said, Levita's performative authoring is to be compared with the ethical reference system the Venetian upper class of the late 15th century borrowed from French patterns through the local adaptation of chivalry romances. Levita's phrase *velsh bukh*, therefore, lies far beyond a definition of the language his inspirational literature was written in, and it encompasses the *gĕstum*, or set of rules, which was in force with the Gentiles who had adopted the chivalry culture of the time. Given Levita's personal experience of abode between Venice and Padua in the period *Bovo-Bukh* was originally composed in, this set of rules mostly mirrors the local reality, but it is not limited to it in his endeavours. His own gesture as an author was meant to tame the wild animal of Romance chivalry culture for the *frumen vayber*, or "noble ladies," of Jewish descent whom the adaptation was formally addressed to. In so doing, Levita still had to abide by Jewish ethics. As a result, a wide field opens for comparison of ethical reference systems, and for analysis of the esthetical solutions adopted to mirror the same.

External differences and similarities: Religion

As Judith Butler stated, "those who work within the presumption of a single and adequate framework make all kinds of suppositions about the cultural sufficiency and breadth of their own thought. As a result, they [...] presume that the [...] framework within which they work is, and must be, not just predominant, but the

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[22] D. Delcorno Branca, 'Un nuovo testimone del «Buovo d'Antona» in ottava rima,' *Italianistica: Rivista di letteratura italiana* 21 [2–3] (1992), p. 705–713.

[23] *Buovo d'Antona: Cantari in ottava rima (1480)*, Rome 2008, p. 36–37.

[24] *Buovo d'Antona*, printed by Annibale Fossi, Venice 1487.

necessary way to understand the meaning of events."[25] What J. Butler refers to is a n o r m a t i v e framework. In the context the quotation is taken from, it is a juridical framework, and yet the concept can be extended to all normative λόγους, including formalised confessional law.

As J. Butler also underlines, "depending on which normative framework controls the semantic field," phenomena can turn out to be quite different things. The thought is far from being original, as its Nietzschean roots reach back to *Über Wahrheit und Lüge*, where truth is said to be but "a mobile army of metaphors [and] metonyms" which must be used according to a superimposed convention.[26] The concept is old, therefore, but its novelty power is unabated. It is within the control of semantics through enforcement of doctrinal law that lies "the question of whether or not blasphemy is, and ought to be, permitted speech," as J. Butler notices.[27]

Here a major difference is to be found between *Bovo-Bukh* and its Venetian inspiration. In the latter, apparently meant for declamation in a restricted circle for the purpose of entertainment, each narrative unit is concluded with some prayer to Catholic objects of devotion. There is also an opening invocation of the same kind, with an anti-Judaic understatement for good measure. Here is the first *ottava* with my own attempt at a translation in prose:

> Iesu christo che p̄ lo peccato / Ilq[ua]l fece eua pría nr̆a madre / Tu fusti í su la croce ɔficato / Tu iusto dio e glorioso padre / De corona de spine incoronato / Da quelle gente despietate e ladre / Frācasti el mūdo chera gia perduto / E nel costato tu fusti feruto

> Jesus Christ, for the sin which our foremother Eve committed, thou werest nailed to the cross, thou god of justice and father of glory, crown'd with a crown of thorns by those ruthless and robberish people, thou franked a world which wereth already lost, and in the ribs thou werest hurt.

Needless to say, the "ruthless and robberish people" were the Jews who allegedly committed deicide. Levita rejected the assumption as a matter of course, but not the idea of a religiously flavoured invocation. In fact, *Bovo-Bukh* begins with a foreword in which he speaks in the first person: *Ikh Elye L[e]vi der shrayb[e]r, din[e]r al[e]r frum[e]n vayb[e]r* – "I, Elye Levi the writer, servant to all the noble ladies..." A short history of the book follows, including thanks in advance for those who would possibly tell it better. Such accuracy was typical of the philologist, and it was part of the performance. To render a Gentile story within the borders of Jewish culture was performative, and declaring himself a "servant to the ladies" in the very beginning was utterly consequent with the framework of reference, in which only women could be interested in vernacular, non-religious texts, to be read during "Sabbaths and [other] holidays," while men had better study Hebrew writs of wisdom. In its actuality, this foreword is a sort of partial summary of the norma-

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[25] J. Butler, 'The Sensibility of Critique,' [in:] T. Asad *et al., Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, Berkeley 2009, p. 102.

[26] F.W. Nietzsche, *Opere 1870/1881*, transl. S. Givone, Rome 1993, p. 96. In abridging the thought in English, I compared the Italian version with the German original as of the latest critical edition: S. Scheibenberger, *Kommentar zu Nietzsches »Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne«*, Berlin-Boston 2016. The publication also contains reproductions of the known handwritten redactions of Nietzsche's essay.

[27] J. Butler, 'The Sensibility of Critique', p. 103.

tive precepts Levita tried and adapted the story to. Observance of such precepts is a mandatory part of the author's gesture.

Immediately thereafter, as hinted above, an invocation follows with religiously inspired tones. No Jew with a minimum of piety would ever address the Godhead by name. It would be blasphemy. Therefore, Levita's invocation is not an invocation in the strict sense of the word, from the Latin *invocō*, "I call." It rather reminds of the formula blessing the Name for making miracles, *nasim*, for our Forefathers "in those days, at this time of the year," as it is usually repeated before holiday celebrations. Incidentally, such liturgical blessings are expressed in the second person, *barukh a t t a h*, whereas in Levita's 'invocation' the indefinite pronoun *men* is used, with the modal verb conjugated in the third person: *Got den zol m[e]n ebig l[a]ubn / un' zayne vund[e]r zol m[e]n kundn*, "God, Him one ought to continually praise, and declare his miracles." It is not clear whether *vunder* translates the Hebrew *nisim,* or it is rather a synonym for *nifloes.* Regardless of vocabulary, the fragment, with its *Got* at the very beginning, sounds like an answer to the "Iesu christo" of the Venetian incunable.

Further, a polemical vein is developed: *Er iz geveltig untn un' obn / zayn l[a]ub iz nit tsu grundn / keyn mensh der es kan volendn / wen es hot nokh drum nokh endn.* "He is mighty down here and up there, his praise needs no justification, nobody can exhaust it, as it has no beginning and no end." Going back to J. Butler, the normative framework acts powerfully on semantics. With an axiology focused on sufferance and penance, like in the case of (late) medieval Catholicism, a description of torture and execution is the same as praise. That has no place in Jewish culture, in which the crucifixion of insurgents in 1st century C.E. represents a defeat, nothing to be proud of. What should definitely be praised is the Lord's might and the "wonders" he can perform.

There are two more issues at stake. The first is the presumption of necessity and breadth of the axiology of reference for the purpose of understanding the meaning of events. That is quite patent in the Christian invocation, in which the Passion appears to be self-explaining. It is sufficient to recall the bare facts for the believer to reach a satisfactory understanding of the Godhead. It is not so for the Jews. The number and quality of the Godhead's epiphanies are such that no single event is needed to justify their praise, nor is human intellect broad enough to encompass their immanence.

The second question attains blasphemy, or what a Jew could considered as blasphemy. It is such to define the Jews themselves as a "ruthless and robberish people," as it denies the very concept of *bris*, the Covenant. Another point is the idea of original sin. Still, Levita does not mean to forbid such utterances. Rather, he delivers a counter-speech. He does not presume his own framework to be necessary nor sufficient. Therefore, he does not postulate that it must be predominant, nor that different utterances should be banned.

That is an author's gesture too. The essence of Judaic theological thought is debate. The very Talmud is a collection of different, sometimes conflicting commentaries, which in turn quote still other scholars of earlier ages. What is expected of a man of letters, like Levita was, is the ability to effectively argumentate with dif-

ferent opinions. By entering an indirect debate with the anonymous author of the
Venetian incunable, he showed he knew the rules of the game as played in the com-
munity of Jewish intellectuals.

Reduction to the known: Jewish rituality and axiology in *Bovo-Bukh*

"The text abounds in Hebraisms," mantains J. Baumgarten.[28] That is worth
noticing indeed, but the Jewish civilisation milestones are to be found beyond the
used vocabulary. Taking the first example by J. Baumgarten, in octave 300 we can
find: *Er gedukht keyns zoym[e]n iz nit do / tsu brukhim hayoshvim vil ikh glaykh
kum[e]n,* "he thought there was [to be] no delay, I will come to the guests immedi-
ately." The phrase *brukhim hayoshvim,* literally "welcomed sitters," is a necessary
μετωνυμία in Hebrew, as *yoshev* is somebody who sits in general, maybe even a con-
vict doing time. Therefore, an 'honoured guest' is somebody who is sitting after
being welcomed with the usual salutation *barukh haba,* "blessed be the one who
came." The lexical peculiarity of the expression does not lie in the Hebraism in it-
self. In Yiddish, there are at least two more words for 'guest.' One, *gast*, is of clear
Germanic origin, but we can meet yet another Hebraism, *oyrekh,* with a root re-
lated to sight like the English 'visitor,' from the Latin *vīsus.* The choice of *barukh
hayoshev* has reasons going far beyond semantics. It is dictated by a hypercodified
intertext. It is not simply a 'guest' come to see his hosts, but a guest at a banquet,
possibly a wedding reception, where he is supposed to be sitting for long.

If sharing company during a celebration is a value in itself in Jewish axiology
and, as such, does not need further explanation for the addressees, a comparison
with the Venetian original shows the key elements of celebration are different. At the
wedding banquet, *ui sera de molte belle gente* [...] *Tu ne serai uestito richamente
/ E ben da bere e da māzare hauerai,* quoth the fisherman whom Bovo asked for
passage. "There will be many beautiful people," and [as a jester] "thou shalst be
richly dressed, and thou shalst get drink and food galore." Here, the key values ap-
pear to be glamour and a show of affluence made patent through the abundance of
refreshments. Different frameworks carry along different authoring performances.

The approach can be inverted. It is worth noticing as typically Catholic seman-
tics related to misfortunes as a consequence of sin are underlined in the Venetian
incunable, while Levita's adaptation recalls just another ethic norm. After hearing
the news his beloved Drusiana is to be married to Machabrun, or מקאברון according
to the Yiddish spelling, Bovo expresses his despair: *E disse oime lasso mi pecca-
tore.* "O miserable me, sinner me" is a juxtaposition leaving definitely little or no
room for interpretation, if read within the Catholic ideology of redemptive suffering.

Levita's approach is totally different. If the Venetian character sees separation
as expiation for his own sins, with a logic tilted backwards, Levita's hero is much
more concerned with what he is going to do to avoid infringement: *Bovo der var in*

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[28] J. Baumgarten, *Introduction à la littérature yiddish ancienne*, p. 177, n. 30.

zayn[e]m hertsn v[a]re / do er di red h[a]t for num[e]n. He "was true to Drusiana in his heart because he had given her his word." The typically Jewish moral imperative of keeping one's word at all costs once given lies at the base of the statement, and it is not elaborated further in the passage. It is self-explaining in the mainframe of Jewish ethics,[29] therefore not only no Jewish reader would want a clarification, but also abstaining from providing one is proof that the author knows the ethic norms, and he performs his authoring in accordance with them.

In the previous octave, we can clearly find a reference to the Jewish institution of *ketube,* or marriage promise, between the lines, albeit we meet no Hebraism at all. What did Drusiana do? *Dem zelbign h[a]t zi ir e geshvorn / eyn gants yor hot zie oyf in gevart / ober er iz geblibn for lorn / un' di vayl er ir yo nit hot kont vern / zo nimt zie M[a]kabrun ober gor un gern.* "To the same [Bovo] she had sworn to be married. A whole year she has waited for him, but he remained lost, and the period he told her, [he] could not keep, so she takes Machabrun, though not eagerly." The understatement is that she is going to get married to another because the contract she had with Bovo was not fulfilled, and it could supposedly not be, as the groom had disappeared during what the Talmud names a voyage *lemedinath hayam,* overseas. In such a case, the status of 'widow from betrothal' was foreseen, and the bride was even entitled to collect the dower in its entirety.[30] The institution was meant to safeguard women from the highly undesirable condition of *agune*, or 'chained wife,' one who has no proper husband to provide for her, nor is she free to find another, because her formal engagement has not been dissolved. From this point of view, Levita's Drusiana behaves in total accordance with Jewish social norms, and the author obliges.

Sexual intercourse within marriage is not only permitted in Judaism, but it is also considered a *mitsvah*, an ethical merit.[31] The Christian axiology emerging from Venetian *Buovo d'Antona* appears to be inverted. Abstinence is sacred. Here is what we read: *Eglie un āno che lei fu sposata / Da questo nostro altissimo signore /* [...] *Di star un anno fece sacramento / Chel re di lei non haria godimento.* Drusiana has been married to the King for a year, but she made a chastity vow. No woman can stay in the wake of a man without marriage, nevertheless she is allowed to avoid intercourse in the mainframe of propitiatory sacrifice. Needless to say, that is unthinkable of in Judaism. Therefore, we find no hint at any *mariage blanc* in Levita's story, but Drusiana just waits the customary twelve-month period b e f o r e taking Machabrun as a fully entitled husband.

Another Hebraism J. Baumgarten refers to has apparently little to share with Jewish rituality and peoplehood, yet its cultural significance will increase if we perform a parallel reading with the Venetian original. The word is to be found in octave

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[29] An example can be found in *Sifrei Dvarim* 265:1–3, in which a debate is reported between Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yehuda about the verse "it is better not to vow at all than to vow and not fulfill," *Kohelet* 5:4.

[30] See for example *Ketuvoth* 54b; the maximum period of twelve months from betrothal to marriage, meant for the bride to prepare her trousseau, is hinted at in *Ketuvoth* 54a.

[31] According to the Gemara, a man who already had children can be exempted from having more, but not from having a wife, as reported in the Talmud, *Yevamoth* 62a.

637: *ven ikh farkht vu ikh es leng[e]r oyf tsikh / d[o]s nit bilbulim drayn kem[e]n,*
"because I am afraid, if I delay it longer, that c o n f u s i o n would come about." It is
J. Baumgarten who proposes "[great] confusion" as a translation.[32] In today's Heb-
rew the meaning is accurate, but the word *bilbul* usually recurs only in the singu-
lar. Levita's plural *bilbulim* leaves place for semantic doubts. In modern Yiddish,
de facto, the word translates as "slander," which would make sense in the context of
the passage: A marriage must be soon arranged lest false accusations of extra-mari-
tal sex start flying. Nevertheless, in the glossary to the 1541 edition, Levita finds it
adequate to propose *eyn geshray un' b[i]lbul*, "shouting and confusion," as a trans-
lation for רומור, which can be traced back to the Latin *rūmor* in the same sense.

Assuming therefore that "confusion" is what Levita did mean, it is definitely in-
teresting to compare the concept with what carries the traits of negativity in Ven-
etian *Buovo* instead. The character involved is Malgarita,[33] Sultan's daughter and
former saviour of Bovo himself. In the Venetian version, *la riceue dáno e ponte,*
"she suffers damage and defiance" by one evil Passamonte, or פּאַשׁאַמונט in the Yid-
dish version, therefore she needs Bovo's assistance. First, confusion is not enough,
actual damages must derive from it. Second, the problem is not confusion in itself,
but *ponte,* a plural noun derived from a Latin participial form of *pŭngĕre* as relat-
ed to annoying, provoking somebody.

In other words, the lack of order is not enough for a situation to arise. In Jew-
ish culture, instead, strict arrangements are necessary for community life to go on
in an orderly fashion. The issue was raised in the past by Mary Douglas, among
others. Discussing Leviticus from a cultural anthropologist's point of view, she sug-
gested the rules of *kashruth* have very little to share with food hygiene. It is rather
ambiguity which is considered unclean and abominable. Animals like swine or rab-
bits can be either domesticated or wild, the pig and the coney versus the wild boar
and the hare, therefore they are anomalies.[34] In fact, the Hebrew root for "sacred,"
k-d-sh, is strictly related to separation. What cannot be clearly separated and clas-
sified, that is basically unholy. So it comes to *bilbul* to be the danger supreme.

In this case, too, vocabulary is but one of the aspects. Quite revealing is how
the plot unfolds in Levita's version as opposed to the Venetian original. In the Ven-
etian tale, Malgarita contacts Buovo to call in a favour through a "wealthy envoy"
and his squire who, in so doing, interrupt a chess game Buovo was playing with
one of his knights:

In tanto uenne un richo messagieri / Ingenochiossi subito apresso / E cosi fece un suo scud-
ieri / In tal modo parlo lo nobil messo / Caro signor a uoi son mandato / Signor si fallo habiami
perdonato // a uoi mi māda o signor mio soprāo / Quella per laquale haueti la uita / Cioe la

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[32] J. Baumgarten, *Introduction à la littérature yiddish ancienne*, p. 177, n. 30.

[33] 'Malgarita' is the original spelling of the 1487 incunable. There are several Yiddish transliter-
ations. In Hébreu 750, f. 123 *tergo*, we find a final *tsere* which suggests the name to be pronounced
Malgarite, but in f. 157 *recto*, we also find the spelling *m[a]lg[a]ritah*. In the 1541 edition there is no
vowel notation, and we find both *m[a]lg[a]ritah* and *m[a]rg[a]ritah*. The latter spelling seems influ-
enced by the Latin *margarita,* a pearl.

[34] M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, New York-London 2015.

figlia che fu del soldano / Sei ue ricorda piu de malgarita / Ella ui manda o perfećto christiano / Ve ricordati sella ua seruita / E che di lei non ue domenticati / E che per dio non labandonati.

Meanwhile, a wealthy envoy came. He kneeled immediately nearby, and so did his squire. So quoth the noble messenger: "Dear Lord, I was sent to you. Lord, if I am at fault, forgive me. To you, o Highest Milord, the one sent me whom you owe your very life, that is the late Sultan's daughter. Do you remember Malgarita? She sent me, o perfect Christian, [to ask] whether you remember that she is to be obliged, and that you would not forget about her and, for God's sake, not desert her" [in her hour of need].

A game of chess is present in Levita's version too, octave 587: *Eyn mol shpilt er mit Sinibald im shokh tsofl.* The name of the game is derived from Middle-High-German *schâchzabel,* with the suffix *-zabel* deriving, in its turn, from the Latin *tăbŭla,*[35] so that, in a literal translation, "once he [Bovo] was playing with Sinibald on the chess board." Incidentally speaking, chess as the game of wise men has been a literary τόπος for chivalry romance since the 11th-century Song of Roland. At the Council of Cordres, Charlemagne's knights relax playing one 'game of tables,' while "the wisest and the old" play chess: *As tables juent pur els esbaneier / E as eschecs li plus saive e li viell* (VIII:111–112). Structurally meaningful is that, in the Yiddish version, the contender is identified: Sinibald. Instead, in the Venetian original, we read: *Or tornamo a bouo elq[ua]l un zorno / Giugaua a scachi lo baron adorno // Giogaua con un di soi caualieri / El caualiero giogaua con esso.* "Let us now get back to Bovo, the handsome baron who, one day, played chess. He played with one of his knights, [and] the knight played with him." What is the knight's name, it is utterly unimportant in the Venetian tale. Once more, the supreme value is the glamour of the ruler, who may or may not fancy an anonymous knight the honour of playing with his better. In the Jewish framework, instead, community is paramount. The hero plays with his peer and, being a peer, the latter deserves to be named.

But who interrupts the game in the Yiddish version? *Do brukht im eyn[e]r eyn brif fun Bavl,* "then o n e brought him a letter from Babylon." There is no wealthy messenger with squires in tow and, more important, there is no message transmitted orally with a definitely high degree of formality. The message is contained in a letter, *di h[o]t im di shon M[a]rg[a]rita geshribn,* "which the beautiful Malgarita wrote to him." In spite of being a princess, Levita's Malgarita took pen and paper and wrote personally to Bovo, with no court apparel of noble envoys. The contents are also far from formal. A sense of intimacy flows from the words about her father's death and her surviving but alone: *Un' vi zi aleyn ver oyb[e]r geblibn.* As a result, Pasmont (the same Passamonte of the Venetian original) was trying to *f[a]r tribn,* "expel" her from her lands, and *zi tsu eyn[e]m vayb yo hebn.* There is an understatement in this verse. While *vayb,* in today's Yiddish, is a "wife," the phraseology reveals a somewhat more complicated issue. The verb *hebn,* literally "lift," suggests kidnapping more than betrothal. That is reinforced with the use of the indefinite article *eyn* instead of a possessive. Malgarita was to become o n e of the foreign lord's concubines, probably in his *kharīm.* What is interesting is that the place is never directly named in the Yiddish version, whereas the Venetian original tells explicitly of a 'pavilion:' *Lui la uol fa andar al pauiglione.* Still, polygamy seems

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[35] https://www.woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB (accessed: 5.08. 2021).

to be a taboo for the Christian author too, as the octave ends with: *Al suo dispeto hauerla áche p̱ sposa / Et ella nō consente a cotal cosa.* Kidnapping and factual rape are euphemistically turned into unwanted marriage. That said, the fundamental difference between the two versions is the formality of the Venetian original as opposed to the sentimental intimacy of the Yiddish adaptation.

Bovo's reaction is also different. In the original, he almost unwillingly interrupts his game: *Buouo leuosse che staua a giugare.* After a very brief consult with Sinibaldo, he rallies his army and immediately moves to the rescue: *E cosi sacordono di presente / E comandono a tutta sua gente.* A real leader of men, though respectful of his elders. In the Yiddish version instead, octave 590:

az b[a]ld az Bovo den brif on zakh / do begond er zer tsu d[e]r shrekn / er gab in Sinib[a]ld un' tsu im shpr[a]kh / di dozig vil ikh nit losn shtekn / zi hot mir geholfn oyz mayn notn oykh / ikh ver zonst geshtorbn oyf dem flekn / Sinib[a]ld shpr[a]kh iz zi dir gevezn azo toyglekh / d[o]s du ir zolst helfn d[o]s iz vol moyglekh.

As soon as Bovo watched [read] the letter, he began to tremble much. He gave it to Sinibald, and he said to him: "That I shan't leave alone. She also helped me in my straits, otherwise I should have died on the scaffold." Sinibald said: "She was so useful to you that you ought to help her as well [much] as possible."

Yiddish Bovo is afraid and preoccupied, and he does not hide it. Still more important, Yiddish Sinibald is much more than a military counsellor. He reminds Bovo of his debt of gratitude, shifting the discourse from a plan of mere war tasks to one of ethics, which we find no trace of in the Venetian original. Incidentally speaking, the previous 'usefulness' of Malgarita lost much in translation. The Yiddish adjective *toyglekh* is derived from Middle-High-German *täuglich* or *teuglich,* with the same root *-touc-* as today's German noun *Tugend*, "virtue."[36] In a word, Sinibald reminds Bovo of the moral imperative of repaying virtue with virtue, which goes far beyond the simple damsel-in-distress literary commonplace of the original. Thence we can infer once again how different the Jewish readers' framework of reference was.

Presumption of necessity versus syncretism

After the help came and Passamonte is defeated, Venetian Malgarita only thanks Bovo with a chaste hug in the wake of her dames: *Ma malgarita staua acompagnata / Da molte dāme apie dello pallazo / E gionto buouo lhebbe salutata / [...] Si lo corse abraciare p̱ suo omasio.*

Levita's scene is much more dynamic and sentimental. When the victorious warriors enter the city among fifes and trumpets, *obn on eyn[e]m turn lag Margarita,* she is upstairs in a tower (octave 607, last line). At the commotion, she climbs down. In octaves 608–609 we can read:

do zi Bovo zakh vi bald zi ob her ging / un' l[a]uf im antgegn mit irn meydn / zie fil im um den halz un' in anpfing / mit shayln un' mit grosn freydn / eyn gute vayl zie do on im hing / un' drukt in mit irn or[e]m[e]n beydn / zi shprakh gros froyendshaft hostu mir ton tsaygn / drum iz mayn layb un' gut alz dayn eygn // du bist eyn degn vol geton / du bist tsu l[a]ubn un' nit tsu sheltn /

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³⁶ Ibidem.

di troye di ikh dir hon geton / di hostu mir voln for geltn / un' du host mir gebn eyn gutn lon / vi vol d[o]s m[e]n es fint g[o]r zeltn / gut mit gut pflegt m[e]n nit tsu betsoln / d[e]r nokh furt zi in hinoyf in irn zaln

There she saw Bovo as soon as she climbed down, and she ran to him with her maids. She fell on his neck and embraced him, [asking] questions and [showing] great joy. A long while she hung on him, and she squeezed him with both her arms. She said: "Great friendship you showed me, therefore my life and property are like your own. You have well made a hero [of yourself], you are to be praised, and not criticised. The trust I had in you, you repayed it in full, and you gave me good meeds [for it], as it is seldom found. Good for good, people are not used to reward." Thereafter, she led him up to her chambers.

There is no understatement in the last line. The possessive was added later, probably for metric reasons. In the original manuscript, the verse sounds: *d[e]r nokh furt zi im in eyn grosn zaln*, "she led him into a huge hall," where a banquet was to be held.[37] "And there everybody took off their armour," and Malgarita saw to it that all eat their full, as we read in the first three verses of octave 610, so that there is no doubt as to the lack of intimacy with Bovo. Yet a comparison of the two versions shows a totally different approach.

In the Venetian original, there is absolutely nothing sentimental in Malgarita. Like a behaved hostess, she waits for the hero at the door of her palace, and as he arrives, she hugs him "for homage," with "an angel's face," *con la facia angelicata*, for good measure. That arises the question of what a romance is, and what it was supposed to be in one culture and the other, respectively. As the episode testifies, romance in Levita's performance is strictly linked to adventure, emotions, and love. It is not quite the same in the Venetian original. Here, chivalry is read in the light of Catholic prudence as the necessary framework of morality which, in its exhaustiveness, also controls the semantic field, bringing about a degree of formality unheard of in the Yiddish version. It is the observance of formality before one's betters, as the envoy did in his speech, along with the exhibition of affluence and power, as Malgarita's "many" maids testify, that determines whether a given character belongs in chilvary or not. Feelings like joy and thankfulness, especially if expressed spontaneously during a prolonged physical contact with a man, as Yiddish Malgarita does, are decidedly unbecoming of a dame, and they have no right of abode whatsoever in the version intended for good Catholics. For nothing to say of a woman discussing ethics with a man as his peer, as Yiddish Malgarita does, telling Bovo of trust repayed and good rewarded with good. A woman's place in the Catholic system of reference is with an angel's smile on her face, not with smart words in her mouth. Wisdom is better left to priests.

In both versions, the rescue is to result in marriage between Malgarita and Bovo. Still, the former is a Muslim. The Catholic framework translates into a narrative which results utterly different from the Jewish tale. In the Venetian original, baptism already appears in the same octave in which Malgarita hails the returning Bovo, and it is presented as self-explaining, that is, as if conversion to Christianity were the necessary and unavoidable outcome. More, the Christian reference system is presented as the only possible and viable manner of worshipping the Godhead: *E disse bé uegna lo signor mio / Or mi bateza chio credo al tuo dio.* "Wel-

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[37] JER NLI 7565=8.

come, Milord. Baptise me, as I believe in your God now," is what Malgarita says to Bovo, as if the conversion were only a matter of time, given the implicitly absolute superiority of the relative belief system. What we find in the Yiddish version, instead, is a full theological debate, with no hint whatsoever at different gods for Muslims and supposedly, given the context, Jews. The common monotheism lies in the background, and conversion becomes a mere adaptation to different customs, not beliefs. One which can go either way, although it is Malgarita who decides to embrace Judaism in the end.

Structurally important is also the scenery in which the issue is discussed. While the Venetian character chooses a public space to declare her will to be baptised, having her many maids as witnesses, Yiddish Malgarita discusses the issue privately with Bovo, approaching go on the side in the hall of mead, while the remaining knights are busy feasting. In the latter part of octave 610, *do v[o]s zikh Marg[a]rita gegn Bovo kern / zi shprakh gedenkt dikh nit v[o]s ikh dikh bat / un' du volst nit tretn in mayn[e]n gla[u]bn / nun vil ikh in den dayn[e]n vil[s]tu mikh h[o]bn.* After supervising the proceedings of the banquet, she gets back to Bovo and says: "Do you not remember what I asked you for, and you did not want to join my faith? Now I want into yours, if you will have me," implicitly as a wife.

The discourse is here shifted from ontology to rituality. It is no longer a matter of which god is true, as supposedly there is only one for both religions, but of which customs to follow for a future married couple to function in harmony. As Bovo does not mean to convert to Islam, she will convert to Judaism out of her love for him, and only for that reason, as the condition of becoming his wife does not seem negotiable. There is definitely no presumption of necessity: Judaism is as worth a religion as Islam, and conversion is a practical decision, to be made in private moreover, without declarations in the public square. Once more, the Jewish reference system is patently reflected in the narrative unfolding of the plot.

Marriage is planned in the Venetian version as well, but Bovo starts thinking about it only after Malgarita has been unconditionally baptised. The conversion process, in its turn, is much more theatrical, involving public performances and rites of passage, along with a connotative vocabulary which leaves no doubts whatsoever as to the Catholic presumption of exclusivity on the epistemology of immanence. In place of the seven-verse discussion between peers of the Yiddish version, in the Venetian original we find as many as two whole octaves reminding of an *auto da fé*, albeit without stakes and executioners in the end. Here is what we read:

Venuto poi ī su la maestra strada / Bouo chiāo colui chi porta cherica / Disse buouo fa che sia baptizada / Acio che la non uiua cosi heretica / Cosi lei baptizossi a quella fiada / chiamola nelsuo nōe chera ī pratica / E de sua falsa fe lha discargata / E malgarita fu sempre chiamata // Quella si spoglio suo uestimenti / Et ogni cosa si dede per dio / Et adornossi daltri adornamenti.

Then Bovo went into the main street and called for that who maintains a tonsure, and said: "See to it that she is baptised for her to stop living so heretically." Thus was she baptised on the spot. He [the priest] gave her the [same] name which was in use, he unburdened her of her false faith, but she was still called Malgarita. She took off her clothing, and everything was donated for God, and she wore other adornments.

The key elements here are the "main street," that is the public, and therefore declarative, dimension of conversion; the primacy of the clergy, whose representative is needed for the performance to be effective even though, theologically speaking, baptism could have been imparted by lay people too; and the rites of passage, that is the giving of a Christian name and the change of clothing. The underlying axiology is strictly connected to the precise unfolding of a script of ritual confirmation of the primacy of the Catholic church in the public space, with little or no room for the personal dimension of the decision. Meanwhile, the contempt for different beliefs is patently expressed with lexical choices involving heresy and the burden of an allegedly false faith. Only after these politically declarative duties are fulfilled, Bovo decides that he can marry her, and that is his decision, not hers.

Going back to the much more syncretistic approach of the Yiddish adaptation, it appears from the very beginning of the tale. Already in octave 8, the character of Sinibald is introduced, whom Bovo's father entrusts with the education of his son. Sinibald is said to be a *grov.* A possible English translation as 'earl' is accurate but partially. The Middle-High-German word *grāve* is a loan from the Byzantine Greek γραφεύς, literally a 'scribe,' that is a councillor entrusted with the collection of taxes. In time, the title became common among the low nobility and the landed gentry. In the same octave, Sinibald is also defined as *burg grof*, the lord of a fortified castle. In the Venetian original he appears first as *castellano*, but with the adnotation that he had previously been *gran suo cortesano,* a member of his court. What is more important for the purpose of this paper, Venetian Guidone gives his subject a precise order: *Fa che lo mio figliolo sia batezato*, "see to it, that my son is baptised." There is no parallelism in the Yiddish version. There, Sinibald *zolt zayn zayn rekht[e]r gevater.* The lexical choice is willingly ambiguous. In today's Yiddish, *kvater* is a synonym for *sandek*, the person who carries the baby at circumcision. The Hebrew word was surely known to Levita, yet he chose to use a derivative of the Middle-High-German *gevater*, "godfather" also in a Christian sense. The ethical imperative of *hebn den knabn*, raise the 'knave' and instruct him in the ways of the world, is further underlined with the adjective *rekht*, "real" with reference to the capacity of 'godfather.' Sinibald is ordered to become a 'real godfather,' and not only a character in a ritual, be it Christian or Jewish. No trace of this axiology can be found in the Venetian original, in which only baptism is underscored as a declarative sign of belonging in the community of the necessarily true believers.

Indeed, in a later passage of the Yiddish version (octave 498) circumcision appears. The King answers Drusiana's concern for her sons and promises: *eyn hupshe bris milo vil ikh makhn morgn*, "tomorrow I will make a gorgeous circumcision ceremony," with the typical Hebrew word for the Covenant. Even at this point, though, syncretism of a kind transpires. *Bris milo* are the King's words, but what Drusiana says of her children is *zi zayn nokh nit beshnitn*, "they have not been cut yet." She refers to circumcision descriptively, with a 'cut,' as it is performed not only in Judaism, but also in Islam, and in some Christian denominations too. Once more, syncretism emerges.

Misogyny versus gender equality

A major difference between the two versions is the respective image of women. While the Venetian original leaves room for the Catholic binary opposition of the archetypes of the Holy Mother versus the Temptress, the Yiddish adaptation appears to be really addressed to female readers, with female characters acquiring a psychological depth unheard of in the original. We have already recalled the Venetian invocation with Eve's original sin. It is soon followed by a piece of sound advice for men: *Da le perfide donne ui guardati / Da loro altro nō po che mal uscire*, "Beware wicked women, from them nothing but evil can come."

The evil mistress whom Guidone married "in his old age [...] because of his foolishness" (*Ma quádo fu uenuto í grá uechieza / El prese moglie p̱ la sua sciochezza*) is not even named in the beginning. She is not a person, but an avatar of the Temptress, an anonymous succubus luring old men with her glamour talking to their sinful lust.

The tale unfolds in quite another manner in Levita's version. Guidone's bride is carefully and analytically described in octave 6, with plentiful details reminding of a matchmaker's apology in the best tradition of the *shadkhonim.* Here is what we read:

> *Dis hertsogn tokht[e]r fun Borgoniya / die vor im tsu der e gegebn / ir glaykh vor nit biz ge Babiloniya / zie gefil im vol un' vor im ebn / zie vor geheysn die shon Brandoniya.*
> This Duke's daughter from Burgundy was given him for marriage. She was unequalled [from there] to Babilon. He liked her much, and she was his peeress. She was named Brandonia the Beautiful.

The male-centred axiology of the Venetian original emerges also in the manner in which Brandonia, still unnamed at this point, regrets her misery: *O christo che pensata maledetta / Fece lo padre mio cosi uilano / O catiuello a chi tu me maritasti / Quádo a un cosi uechio mi donasti.* "O Christ," she cusses, "what a cursed thought came to my unseemly father. O evil one, whom you made me marry, when you gave me to such an old man." Meanwhile, in the Yiddish version (octave 12), cusses are directed at *fater un' mut[e]r,* that is both parents. *Got geb in den hilekh ale beydn*, "God, give them b o t h the walk," with *hilekh*, the 'walk,' meaning the natural movement of the bowels, an euphemism for diarrhoea. Regardless of the definitely colourful expression of dissatisfaction with her parents' decision, Levita's Brandonia yells in accordance with the Jewish axiology of parenting equality, not Catholic paternalism.

What happens to Levita's Bovo and Malgarita instead? After being told that the latter feels miserable because of the return of his early wife, Bovo faces her directly: *Er shpr[a]kh du must p[e]tsentsiya hobn.* "You must be patient," he said, with a loanword of unclear origin. In octave 635, the first syllable has no vowel. In the glossary attached to the 1541 edition, it is spelled *petsentsiya*, where the first *yud* is supposedly a *mater lectionis* for -*e*-. There is no manner to verify it in the handwritten versions, as even the most complete Vintrits manuscript ends with octave 633. The word seems derived from the Latin *patientia,* but it is not sure from

which vernacular form it is taken. The Venetian word is *pacienza,* without the first affricate and with the root vowel -*a*- of *patior* maintained.[38] The metaphony rather points to a Bolognese pronunciation.

Leaving loans aside, in octave 636 Bovo explains whence "patience" has to come: *Es iz eyn zakh di do ligt am t[o]g / es h[o]bn es gebotn unz[e]r altn / drum oyz dayn[e]m zin dir es nort shlog / un' los unzr[e]n her got valtn.* The first verse requires interpretation. As the Grimms' vocabulary openly states, the concrete meaning of the Middle-High-German word *tac* strictly depends on phraseology, and the productive use of the word makes it impossible to define its semantics in a precise fashion.[39] Historically, it does not only mean "day" as the time span between dawn and sunset, but also "daylight." In this sense, Levita's verse, "it is a thing that lies in the day," can be traced back to the idiom *takhat hashemesh*, "under the sun," recurring in Kohelet. It is therefore "a thing of the world" that one cannot have the lover he or she wants, and Malgarita, according to what "our elders commanded," ought to make appeal to her own *zin*, good common sense, and accept it, letting the Lord's will have its course.

Previously, in octave 635, *M[a]lg[a]rita z[o]gt m[e]n d[o]s leydig bitn brot / vie Bovo zayn erst vayb ver kum[e]n / zi d[e]r shrak d[o]s hin fil for tot / un' redt glaykh az vil az di sztum[e]n / Bovo der must zi zelbst labn.* "Malgarita, they say, [had] hardly bitten bread since Bovo's first wife came [back]. She threatens she will fall dead, and she talks as much as the dumb, Bovo himself must refresh her." We meet here the uncommon Middle-High-German verb *laben*, derived from the Latin *lavāre*, "wash," in the sense of giving new strenght.

There is nothing of this female subjectivity in the Venetian original. Neither is Malgarita's disappointment described, nor Bovo feels compelled to provide an explanation, treating her like a peer and making appeal to her good senses. That is how a dame should behave instead in a Catholic-oriented community:

Or uenne a malgarita la nouella / [...] Onde cotal parole gli fano noglia / Ma uene tosto alor ꞷostrado zolia // Ma certo ella nera molto dolente / De la uenuta de quella duchessa / E disse signor non farai niente / De la nostra cara e dolce promessa / Ma poi chio uegio cosi chiaramĕte / Che de uostra ꝑsona questa e dessa / Cosi prego signor che la tignati / E fidelmente ísieme uoi regnati.

Now the news came to Malgarita [of Drusiana's return], and those words annoy her, still she went to them showing joy. Although she was in pain for the arrival of that Duchess, she said: "Milord, you will do nothing of our dear and sweet promise. Yet, as I see so clearly that [woman] belongs to you, pray thee keep her, and you both reign truly together."

Duplicity is not only forgivable, but even required of a dame whose main assignment is to show *zolia*, a loan from the Old French verb *jolier*, "entertain joyously." On the other hand, Bovo has to "keep" the returning Duchess, as if she were a belonging.

For an interpretation of the axiological dissonance found between the Venetian original and Levita's adaptation in matters of sexuality and gender relations, J. But-

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[38] G. Boerio, *Dizionario del dialetto veneziano*, Venice 1829, p. 595.

[39] https://www.woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB (accessed: 23.08.2021).

ler's considerations result once more useful. With reference to M. Foucault's *History of Sexuality,* she maintains:

> Foucault understands sexuality as saturated with power and offers a critical view of theories that lay claim to a sexuality before or after the law. [...] Foucault engages a reverse-discourse which treats "sex" as an e f f e c t rather than an origin. In the place of "sex" as the original and continuous cause and signification of bodily pleasures, he proposes "sexuality" as an open and complex historical system of discourse and power that produces the misnomer of "sex" as part of a strategy to conceal and, hence, to perpetuate power-relations.[40]

From this point of view, discussing openly the normative aspects of marriage, as Levita's Bovo does reminding Malgarita of what "our elders commanded," results in disruption of the hidden mechanism with which power, through concealment, achieves its own productivity. The Jewish normative framework, by presenting itself as such, requires to be shared in full to function properly, thence the "patience" which Bovo invites Malgarita to actively develop. Instead, in the Catholic framework, the arbitrary production of norms is deemed necessary, thus the externally imposed relation between power and sex is concealed.

Conclusions

As seen in the examples above, Levita's adaptation of *Buovo d'Antona* carries the traits of performative authoring. While mantaining the same characters and storyline of the original, the Yiddish version does not only expunge the overtly confessional utterances, substituting them in places with syncretistic comments, but it also unfolds the plot with fresh details that mirror the major axiological differences in the addressees' respective communities. In this manner, aesthetics results deeply influenced by the ethical frameworks of reference, with the Jewish one showing a lesser degree of supposition about the cultural sufficiency and necessity of its own discourse.

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