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Abstract

History and Territorial Boundaries. The Yiddish language emerged around the tenth century among the Jewish communities in Lotharingia in the Rhine valley. From there it spread to Northern Italy, Northern France and Holland with newly established Ashkenazi colonies, and under the impact of the Crusades to Central Europe and then eastward, to Slavic countires.[33] Old Yiddish (1250-1500), primarily a spoken language, functioned as the language of oral tales, songs, fables, and proverbs. From that period scattered glosses and phrases are extant, the earliest of them is a blessing inscribed in an illuminated prayer book of Worms dated from 1272. The earliest document of literary activity in Yiddish dates from 1382. It was discovered in a cachet of manuscripts (*genizah*) in Cairo, and now it is housed in Cambridge University library.

Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | Folklore | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Oral History | Yiddish Language and Literature

Comments

The publication in which this item appeared has since ceased.

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History and Territorial Boundaries. The Yiddish language emerged around the tenth century among the Jewish communities in Lotharingia in the Rhine valley. From there it spread to Northern Italy, Northern France and Holland with newly established Ashkenazi colonies, and under the impact of the Crusades to Central Europe and then eastward, to Slavic countries.[39] Old Yiddish (1250-1500), primarily a spoken language, functioned as the language of oral tales, songs, fables, and proverbs. From that period scattered glosses and phrases are extant, the earliest of them is a blessing inscribed in an illuminated prayer book of Worms dated from 1272. The earliest document of literary activity in Yiddish dates from 1382. It was discovered in a cachet of manuscripts *(genizah)* in Cairo, and now it is housed in Cambridge University library. The Cambridge Codex[34] includes six separate poetic narratives about traditional topics: "The Death of Aaron," "Paradise,"[35] "Abraham the Patriarch," "Joseph the Righteous," ["A Fable of the Sick Lion,"[36]] two lists one of the weekly reading portions of the Pentateuch and the other of the stones on the High Priest's breastplate, and a text of Dukus Horant, a German epic of which the Yiddish text is the only extant version.[37] This fourteenth century manuscript represents the two basic types of Yiddish narrative poetry that began to appear in print in the sixteenth century: (a) epic renditions of biblical narratives which incorporated anachronistic midrashic interpretations and medieval realia, and (b) translations of medieval European epic poetry. These are literary works that draw upon Jewish and non-Jewish traditional resources. Among the first group are such epic narratives as the *Shmuel Bukh* (Augsburg, 1544),[38] the *Melokhim* [Kings] Bukh (Augsburg, 1543)[39] and the *Aqedat Jishaq* [Sacrifice of Isaac] narrative poem.[40] Prominent in the second group are the anonymous Yiddish rendition of the Arthurian romance that was printed in Prague in 1652-1679,[41] and the Yiddish translation that Elijah Bahur Levita (1469-1549) of the popular romance about Buovod'Antona that was derived from the knightly romance *Sir Bevis of Hampton.* This translation known as the *Bove Bukh* was written in 1507 and printed in 1541.[42] In rendering Jewish and non-Jewish traditional and popular narratives Yiddish writers turned to the poetic form because of its higher status in the aesthetic hierarchy of literature. The linguistic hierarchy in European Jewish communities can also explain the transition cycle of narratives from oral circulation to print. The tales were first told in Yiddish, the vernacular, then frequently written down in Hebrew, the more prestigious of the two written languages, and then retranslated into literary Yiddish.[43]

It is possible to delineate three periods in the writing and printing of Yiddish folktales. The early period (1504-1604), from which both books and manuscripts are extant, centered in northern Italy, a printing center that declined toward the end of the sixteenth century. The middle period (1660-1750) centered in Amsterdam in the west and Prague in the east and is distinguished by the publication of numerous booklets, many of which were of known tales. Toward the end of the Middle Yiddish period (17th and 18th centuries) the cities of Fürth and Frankfurt am Main rose as printing centers for such booklets. A shift from West-European to East European printing centers marks the third period(1750-1814). An increase in the use of literary Eastern Yiddish in the publication and republication of narrative texts marks this geographic transition.

Sources. There are four kinds of literary sources in which traditional tales are available (a) narrative anthologies, (b) framed narratives, (c) narrative booklets, and (d) narrative supplements.

(a) Narrative anthologies. The earliest collection of Yiddish tales is found inserted in a manuscript of a prayer book from northern Italy that was written in 1504.[44] Nine other manuscripts of various sizes are extant.[45] They date from the sixteenth century and were written or copied in different cities in northern Italy and Germany. The printed anthologies began to appear in the seventeenth century, the largest of them was also the first. The *Ma'aseh* book *(Mayse Bukh)* is a collection of 257 tales that Jacob ben Abraham, a book dealer from Mezhirich "of Lithuania," had printed in the press of Konrad Waldkirch in Basel in 1602.[46] The book enjoyed an immense popularity being reprinted in at least thirty four editions. *Ma'asei Adonai* was a collection of 50 tales that appeared in two volumes in Frankfurt am Maine in 1691 and in Fürth in 1694. The editor Rabbi Akiva Baer ben Joseph culled most of these tales from kabbalistic and mystical books.[47] The first author who deliberately recorded tales from oral tradition was the sexton and trustee of the Jewish community in Worms, Jephtah Joseph Yozpa ben Naftali (1604-1678).[48] He came to the community as a young man of nineteen and, being fascinated by the city and its legends, wrote down 25 of them for posterity. He was a meticulous recorder of local oral tradition, noting down his sources and the circumstance of narration, albeit he wrote them down in Hebrew. Only posthumously did his son translate the stories back into their original Yiddish and publish them as *Ma'aseh Nissim* [Miracle Tales] (Amsterdam,1696).[49] The last book of the same genre that appeared in the seventeenth century was *Eyn sheyn naye mayse bukh* (Dyrhenfurth, 1697) that was edited by the Hungarian rabbi Jonathan ben Jacob (17th century) and contained eleven tales. No new narrative anthologies appeared during the eighteenth century, and the only one known to have been prepared, was a collection of sixteen tales which is extant in a 1750 manuscript. This short anthology which was prepared by Nathan Neta ben Simeon, draws upon *Kaftor va-Ferah* ["A Bud and a Flower"] (Basle, 1581) by Jacob ben Isaac Luzzatto (16th century), a book which was popular with Yiddish anthologists.[50] The *Maaseh Book*, often reprinted, served as a model for narrative anthologies and for oral narratives throughout the eighteenth century.

In the nineteenth century, with the transition to modern Yiddish, this publication format underwent radical changes, shifting geographically to East Europe, and serving the emerging Hasidic religious movement. Ensuing such changes the target readership of the Hasidic narrative anthologies were no longer women, but male cult members. However bi-

lingualism has remained a distinctive feature of this literary form. *Shivhei ha-Besht* ["In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov"] (Kopys, 1814), the collection of hagiographic narratives about the founder of the Hasidic movement Israel Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760), appeared first in Hebrew, but a Yiddish edition immediately followed (Ostrog 1815). The interdependence of the two editions is a subject for research.[31] Around the same time a unique narrative anthology *Sippurei Ha-Maasiyyot* ["Tale"] of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1810) appeared in print (Ostrog [or Moghilev], 1815). This is a collection of artistic, literary, allegorical tales that draw upon folktale motifs and themes. Their author composed them orally and his scribe and amanuensis, Nathan Sternhartz of Nemirov, wrote them down as he heard them from his rabbi or as reported by his followers. *Sefer Ha-maasiyyot* appeared in a bi-lingual edition of Hebrew and Yiddish, though their original language of narration was, undoubtedly, Yiddish.[32]

(b) The Framed Narratives. While the narrative anthologies drew upon the Jewish tradition in Hebrew and Aramaic from talmudic-midrashic and medieval periods, the framed narratives represented an exclusive dependency on non-Jewish sources. The book *The Seven Wise Men* appeared in seven different translations from German and Dutch sources, but none that depended upon its Hebrew version of the Oriental tradition of the story known as *The Tales of Sendebar*.[33] The *Arabian Nights* appeared in Yiddish translation in 1718, shortly after its publication by Galland (1704-1717). Its translator and publisher was an entrepreneur that planned to serialize the tales, printing them in small booklets. Similarly, the stories of *Till Eulenspiegel* and *Schildburger* appeared in Yiddish translations in the eighteenth century.[34]

(c) Booklets. The single booklet, devoted mostly to one story, reached the height of its popularity during the second half of the 16th century when fifty such small publications appeared. These were octavo booklets, published in Amsterdam or Prague, that held four to sixteen pages in which, most often, a single story appeared. Most tales were translations from the apocrypha, talmudic-midrashic and medieval Hebrew sources. In a number of cases, the story of the holidays were related. In the late period the number of translations from non-Jewish sources increased and translations from the Hebrew or original works declined.

(d) Space-Fillers. These were single tales that the printers appended to other books in order not to leave a blank space.

Themes. The dependency upon talmudic-midrashic, apocryphal, and Hebrew medieval sources on the one hand, and European folk-books and popular romance tradition on the other, defines the thematic range of the popular literature in Old and Middle Yiddish. The narrative anthologies include biographical stories about Rashi [Rabbi Shlomoh son of Isaac], Judah the Pious as well as Maimonides. Others are tales of martyrdom, miracles and faith that have become part of the Jewish tradition in many languages. Among the original Yiddish narratives it is possible to recognize Jewish versions of common tale types as well as culturally specific historical legends that concern cases of exorcism and salvation.

In the process of adapting common tales to Jewish

audience the narrators neutralized motifs that were clearly Christian, or even transformed them to Jewish symbols and values; they set the plot within Jewish communities, referred to Jewish historical settings, and established a reward that would be within the framework of Jewish life.[35] The demonological stories, though they employed common motifs, were also set within Jewish society and religious practices and constitute narrative tradition of Jewish demonology.[36] The historical accounts often dealt with supernatural forces and were tales of spirit possession and exorcism attached to historical figures.[37]

Audience. In various introductions and comments the printers and editors point out that these Yiddish narratives were specifically designed for the benefit of children, women and men who could not keep up with their early study of Hebrew.

Early Judeo-Spanish Folk-Narratives

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Territorial Boundaries. After their expulsion from Spain in 1492 the Jews settled in two principal centers: (a) Morocco, where geographical proximity ensured a continuous influence of Iberian peninsula culture, and (b) The Ottoman Empire, where their Hispanic heritage came under Turkish and Greek influences.

Oral and Written Literatures. The popular nature of Judeo-Spanish literature manifests itself in three ways: (a) oral transmission, (b) a narrator who is an integral part of the community, and (c) the narration of originally Hebrew texts in Judeo-Spanish, making them accessible to their new audience.[38] Oral and written genres such as the proverb *(refrán)*,[39] the Judeo-Spanish ballad *(romance* or *romanza* in the language of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire)[40] the song *(canción, copla* or *compla)*,[41] the lyric song *(cantiga de amor)*,[42] and the tale and the tale *(conseja)*, flourished in both centers. Except for the *copla*, which is written, the other poetic genres are mostly oral, though some historical documentation of their transmission and performance is available. However, this is not the case in regard to folktales. Evidently, this genre was not thought of as being worthy of serious notice. Only later a few individual members of the community would record, in private, a few tales. In doing so they would concentrate exclusively on narratives that belonged to the heritage of Hebrew Literature.

The recording of the Judeo-Spanish rendition of Jewish oral tradition reached a turning point in the 18th century with the publication of *Me-Am Lo'ez*, a volume dedicated to commentary on Genesis, in Constantinople in 1730. The author, Ya'acob Huli [Culi] (c.1689-1732)[43] tried to simplify the content of his book and to use the contemporaneous language of the Spanish Jews, representing a conversational narrative style. According to his own words he sought to tell his stories *a modo de cuento, como una presona va contando* "in the tale mode, as if a person is telling [a story]."[44] His pioneering effort resulted in a work of encyclopedic dimensions. Although Huli's starting point was biblical interpretation, his work encompassed rabbinical knowledge