

Echoes of the Italian Renaissance in the Poetical Creation of a Jewish Humanist

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▶ **To cite this version:**

Arnaud Bikard. Echoes of the Italian Renaissance in the Poetical Creation of a Jewish Humanist. Raniero Speelman, Monica Jansen, Silvia Gaiga. Jewish Migration: Voices of the Diaspora, Igitur Publishing, 2012. hal-01739321

HAL Id: hal-01739321
https://inalco.hal.science/hal-01739321

Submitted on 20 Mar 2018

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BIKARD, Arnaud. 'Echoes of the Italian Renaissance in the Poetical Creation of a Jewish Humanist'. *Jewish Migration: Voices of the Diaspora*. Raniero Speelman, Monica Jansen & Silvia Gaiga eds. ITALIANISTICA ULTRAIECTINA 7. Utrecht: Igitur Publishing, 2012. ISBN 978-90-6701-032-0.

SUMMARY

Elia Levita, grammarian, teacher of Hebrew to many Christian humanists in the first half of the Sixteenth century, is also the author of two Yiddish epic romances inspired by Italian sources, *Bovo-Buch* and *Paris un Wiene*, which are considered to be among the finest works of old Yiddish literature. These romances relating love-stories between knights and princesses reveal a precise knowledge of contemporary Italian culture, particularly the tradition of *romanzo cavalleresco*. *Bovo-Buch,* composed in 1507, has left a significant mark on the whole history of Yiddish culture. It is characterized by its freedom of tone and popular expressive style. *Paris un Wiene,* probably written in the 1530s, owes much to Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. At the same time, it shows a mastership in the art of satire which might originate from a long tradition of Hebrew poetry. This article aims to present the rich cross-cultural influences which lead to the composition of Elia Levita's two Yiddish masterpieces.

KEYWORDS

Renaissance, Yiddish, Literature, Levita, Humanist

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The proceedings of the international conference *Jewish Migration: Voices of the Diaspora* (Istanbul, June 23-27 2010) are volume 7 of the series ITALIANISTICA ULTRAIECTINA. STUDIES IN ITALIAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE, by Igitur Publishing. ISSN 1874-9577 (http://www.italianisticaultraiectina.org).

ELIA LEVITA'S YIDDISH WORKS
ECHOES OF THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE IN THE POETICAL CREATION OF A JEWISH HUMANIST

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In the realm of cross-cultural phenomena, Elia Bachur Levita is an archetype. Born in 1469 (or 1468) in Ipsheim near Nuremberg, he is considered one of the most influential scholars in the history of Hebrew Grammar. In this field, he published dozens of books.[1] Upon moving to Italy in the 1490s, he was engaged as a teacher of various Christian erudites, including Egidio da Viterbo in Rome and George de Selve in Venice, through whom he was invited by the French king François I to teach at the newly-founded Collège Royal. Levita refused this offer since he would have been the only Jew living in France after the expulsion of 1394. Through the Latin translations of Sebastian Münster and Paul Fagius, he became the Hebrew teacher of scores of humanists over at least three centuries.[2] Richard Simon, a seventeenth century French Christian Hebraist, who was famous for his translation of Leo da Modena's *Storia dei riti Ebraici*, acknowledged the debt he owed towards Elia Levita.[3]

A LIFE AT THE CROSSROADS OF ASHKENAZI-JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN-ITALIAN CULTURES

A typical Renaissance man, Elia Levita excelled in more than one art. He gave old Yiddish literature some of its best pages. One might be surprised to read that Yiddish literature partly originated in Italy. Yet, this is an important fact. Throughout the sixteenth century, and until the first decades of the seventeenth century, Italy was home to the main publishers of Yiddish literature. Israeli scholar Chone Shmeruk has shown that a significant number of Yiddish books produced at the time originated from the Italian presses of Soncino and Bomberg, as well as other preeminent publishers of Hebrew books.[4] Levita himself collaborated with Bomberg as a proofreader of liturgical, biblical, and midrashic literature. Not only did Italy play a crucial role in the publication of early Yiddish literature, it was also the place where some of the literature's major works were drafted by Ashkenazi Jews who immigrated there due to the growing enmity they faced in German-speaking territories.

Before presenting Levita's poetical production, it is important to note a genre that is only present in Yiddish literature, namely: biblical epics. Wishing to capitalize on the wildly popular chivalric romance genre, which was thriving throughout Europe at that time, Ashkenazi writers adapted that style's generic codes to their own culture. They turned the most belligerent books of the Bible, such as the *Book of Kings*, into lengthy epics that conformed to contemporary German rules of poetics

and aesthetics. These works were comprised of four line strophes of two rhyming couplets, in which each line is divided rhythmically into two half-lines of three primary accents each. The *Book of Samuel* was thus composed, probably in Northern Italy at the end of the fifteenth century. Written in the most traditional chivalric style, the work recounts the adventures of King Saul and King David.[5] Though Christians also drafted such adaptations, an important difference must be underlined: Jewish authors mostly drew their narrative material from the Talmud and Midrash, thus creating an original mix of secular and religious motifs.[6]

Elia Levita inherited this tradition. Unlike older generations of Yiddish writers, however, his culturally secular background was more Italian than German. The censorship lists the Duchy of Mantua asked the Jews to draft in 1595 offer us a rare look into the libraries and literary tastes of Northern Italian Jews at the end of the sixteenth century. Two facts in those lists are of particular importance for this study. First, although secular literature – and the *belles-lettres* in particular – represented only small minority of the books that Jews owned, it appears that Ashkenazi Jews were quite interested in this reading, despite it generally considered frivolous, if not thoroughly condemnable. Second, the most popular books among Jews were chivalric romances, with Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* being the far-and-away bestseller.[7]

These two insights into the contemporary literary tastes among Jews in Italy are essential in order to understand and interpret Elia Levita's poetical work. Throughout his long life (Levita died in Venice in 1548 at the age of 79), Levita never gave up on writing Yiddish poetry. This fact contradicts his biographer Gérard Weil's characterization of Levita's Yiddish writing as merely a youthful pastime, which he eventually abandoned in order to dedicate himself fully to his grammatical works.[8] Elia Levita's poetical production essentially consists in two chivalric romances that he adapted from the Italian works *Buovo d'Antona,* which became the *Bovo-Buch* in Yiddish, and the *Paris e Vienna,* which became *Pariz un Wiene*.

The first volume was written in 1507 and had a certain amount of influence in Yiddish culture. It was republished in various adaptations until the twentieth century.[9] Moreover, due to its highly adventurous and unlikely plot, it contributed to the formation of one of modern Yiddish's best-known phrases: *Bobe-mayse*, which means an old wives' tale. The second book was probably written in the 1530s. There is some doubt about its attribution to Elia Levita. Rather than linger on this issue under debate,[10] I follow the opinion of Elia Levita's editor Erika Timm, who has produced convincing evidence of Levita's authorship of *Pariz un Wiene.*

Levita's long epic poems draw on an old tradition of tales about knights, which arrived in Italy from France, for the most part, during the Middle Ages and fueled the overwhelming fashion of *romanzi cavallereschi* in sixteenth century Italy. Both *Bovo-Buch* and *Pariz un Wiene* are stories of unfulfilled love between a knight and a princess of noble birth. Both books are composed of around seven hundred *stanze* and are much more than mere translations or even adaptations of their Italian counterparts. The use of *ottava rima* is itself a crucial innovation. The form, which had

not appeared in any Germanic language at that time, wasn't present in German literature until the first translation of Torquato Tasso at the end of the sixteenth century. By adapting this typical Italian form to his highly accentuated language, Levita was one of the first poets in Europe who progressively adopted a syllabic-metrical pattern and contributed, as Benjamin Hrushovsky has shown, to the creation of accentual iambs.[11]

LEVITA'S STYLE IN THE ITALIAN CONTEXT OF *ROMANZI CAVALLERESCHI*

Levita's works are admired both for their poetical mastery and for their remarkable freedom of tone. Levita was aware that his Jewish readers didn't have the same relationship to the feudal world described in the chivalric romance as their Christian contemporaries. He consequently rewrote his poems with biting, humorous wit. He was one of the first writers in Italy to treat this chivalric material with such distance. The *Bovo-Buch* was written in 1507. Luigi Pulci, in his *Morgante*[12] published in 1483, had already introduced the tendency to mock the Italian tradition of chivalric romance through burlesque. Yet, this humorous trend did not prevail in Italian literature because of the overwhelming influence of Boiardo's *Orlando inamorato*, published immediately after Pulci's work in 1483. Instead of deriding the conventions of the genre, Boiardo and his most famous follower Ariosto played with them, combined them, and varied them in a nearly infinite feast of imagination. Boiardo and Ariosto replaced Pulci's burlesque with a slight irony, and the text only sporadically provokes real bursts of laughter similar to the one, which killed Margutte in *Morgante*. It is not until the 1520s that burlesque reemerges in the *romanzo cavalleresco*: this time, with new vigor in the works of Teofilo Folengo and Pietro Aretino.[13] Levita often derides his source texts in the *Bovo-Buch*. He does not linger too long on the stories of giants and dragons that are frequent in *Buovo d'Antona*. Instead, the narrator states that those are obvious lies.[14] This skeptical view on some of the most fantastic elements of chivalric material is associated with the introduction of typically Jewish elements into the Christian frame of narration. For example, the twin sons of the main heroes Bovo and Drusiana are led to their father-in-law to be circumcised, although they were born with the help of Pelukan, a friendly monster who is half man, half dog. This detail, among others, creates an effect of burlesque absurdity. In this context, the traditional wedding under the *chuppah (*traditional Jewish wedding canopy) of the noble knight and his princess at the end of both works seems to be only natural, given the books' consistently free mode of adaptation.

Elia Levita's creative freedom does not express itself equally in both epics. *Bovo-Buch* is distinguished by constant references to what Mikhail Bakhtine has defined as the carnivalesque: the inversion of traditional values, the use of the grotesque and the burlesque, the stress on the lower parts and functions of the body.[15] The narrative's fights, in particular, are described in a ridiculous and careless

manner which insists on the knights' falling on their asses – or bottoms (*toches*) or shitting out of fear (*beschaissen*) in their armor.

Although those elements are also present in *Pariz un Wiene*, this later work demonstrates a greater refinement and more poetical achievement. *Pariz un Wiene* draws inspiration from the best Italian literature of the day and is very influenced by Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. Elia Levita's style in the work is linked more closely to the main tendencies of Italian literature in the 1530s. The work was composed around the time Ariosto wrote his epic. *Pariz un Wiene* is closer stylistically to the literary standards of the time. The Yiddish writer demonstrated a particular skillfulness and creativity in adapting Ariosto's model. He even put an original twist on this Italian model by using some realistic devices of which Ariosto's poem is devoid, but which were widespread in the Italian novella of the time. The author himself, who was proud of his verses, explained that *Pariz un Wiene* was based on an Italian version in prose.[16] The names of the characters come from the French town Vienne, which is the capital of the French region of Dauphiné, near Lyon. The feudal relationships, however, which were illustrated in the original thirteenth century work, have lost their significance in Levita's version. Nonetheless, the description of amorous feelings, and the codes of courtly love, are not neglected in the Yiddish work; they are extremely idealized.[17] An omnipotent and ironic narrator brilliantly masters the technique of *entrelacement* used by the Italian poets, intertwining the various threads of the story into a rich fabric. The narrator imitates Ariosto in introducing himself in the action and confessing that he is a frustrated lover hoping his beloved's heart will be more lenient with him after she hears the story of the two famous lovers. In another instance, the narrator hurries back to separate some knights he left quarrelling pages earlier, lest they tear each other into pieces. He feels his heart breaking while describing the sufferance of the princess in prison and then promises the reader he will not come back to her until he can make her laugh.

Levita's poetic creativity finds its greatest expression in the various prologues of the *canti*. The author was emboldened by Ariosto's work to believe that his own story would not be impaired either if he interrupted it, interspersing satirical and moralizing reflections into the narration. Since Jewish readers were not used to this kind of liberty, he forewarns them in the prologue, promising that he will not leave them stranded in the middle of the story forever, should he stray from his tale for a time. *Pariz un Wiene* is composed of ten *canti*, each one introduced by a prologue. Some of them are real masterpieces of satirical discourse and the subjects that he treats are quite diverse. They range from a meditation on the value of friendship as opposed to family bonds, to a severe satire of the unfriendliness of Jews in the Venice Ghetto.

Levita was not a beginner in the genre of satire when he composed *Pariz un Wiene*. He already demonstrated his satirical wit in two *pasquinate* written on the occasion of Purim in 1514.[18] These two satires take aim at the Venetian teacher Hillel Cohen, who might be a fictitious character, and describe the looting that followed a fire on the Rialto bridge. Hillel accused Elia Levita of taking part in the rampage. The

poet's reply is devastatingly comic. He takes the form of the song *Hamavdil ben kodesh ve khol*, which is recited each Saturday night at the end of *Shabbat*, to draw a clear line between himself and Hillel. He describes his opponent as an ignorant pervert who has been left by three successive wives. The freedom of these verses, and their overtly carnivalesque tone (since they were written for *Purim*) approach the raw spirit of some parts of the *Bovo-Buch*.

The prologues of *Pariz un Wiene* are distinguished by a more Ariosto-like spirit of satire. Levita's *ottave rime* are masterfully constructed. He is able to characterize a moral, abstract quality— like hypocrisy— in a concrete and concise way. The ninth *canto,* for example, describes the way rich men are surrounded by a crowd of flattering hypocrites who disappear as soon as their money runs out. The description goes as follows: "One caresses his shoulder, another lies at his feet as soon as he calls his name, a third profusely sings his praise, and the last wipes from his garment the smallest feather".[19]

Two themes in particular trigger Levita's acid wit: the omnipotence of gold, and the inconsistency of women. The first theme mirrors Jews' social conditions in Northern Italy. While Ariosto derides the disappearance of courtly values, Levita addresses a mostly urban public that often gives the banker the upper hand.[20] We learn, incidentally, by observing the way Levita allows himself to satire his fellow Jews, that they mostly enjoyed a privileged position within society – at least until the Trento Council's severe regulations and the beginning of Counter Reformation.[21] It is important to note as well that by writing in Yiddish – and therefore in the Hebrew alphabet – Levita clearly did not intend his work to be read outside the Jewish world.

The author's other theme, the satire of women, best illustrates the complexity and richness of Levita's writings. The theme had become deeply Jewish, since Joseph Ibn Shabtay wrote the *Minkhat Yehuda* in medieval times and introduced the debate about the nature of women into Hebrew literature.[22] From that point on, the *querelle des femmes* remained a traditional pretext of poetical jousts between Jewish poets until the mid-sixteenth century in Italy from where several poems in Hebrew and Judeo-Italian have been preserved. Levita certainly also inspired by an Italian literary trend of misogyny, which originated from Boccaccio's *Corbaccio* – precise echoes of which can be found in *Pariz un Wiene*.[23] Levita was obviously familiar with the great satirists of his time, Berni and Aretino, who wrote sharp verses against women.[24] His own versions are not inferior to those of these famous Italian satirists. His satire of women is both witty and colorful: "They turn their hair to a golden blond, using unguents made of oil and sulfur. On their forehead and eyebrows, you see immediately how women pluck their hairs. If you get teased by them, you're caught like a fool, since their beauty melts like clear snow on a sunny spring day".[25]

Thus, though the narration itself idealizes female virtues, in which Vienna plays a very noble role, and though the narrator himself regularly recalls his love for his *belle dame*, Levita indulges in some strong strains of caricature. Still, there is no incoherence. With the literary liberty of the Renaissance, Levita purposefully desires

to stimulate his reader with the sharp irony of his writings and with the capricious playfulness with which he treats his subject.

CONCLUSION

At the end of this short introduction to Elia Levita's poetical work, it must again be stressed that these volumes are certainly some of the best illustrations of the rich encounter between Italian literature and Jewish culture in the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, they are not an isolated case. Jews were active in Italian cultural life throughout this century, whether writing in Italian, in Yiddish, or in Hebrew. Their creative works range from Hebrew poetry, following exclusively Jewish models, to theatre in Italian, that was written, for example, for the court of the Gonzaga in Mantova.[26] Levita's contributions lie somewhere in the middle of this broad spectrum. Though his works exclusively addresses a Jewish audience, since they are written in Yiddish, and therefore with Hebrew characters, he also incorporates into his writing a lot of the cultural heritage of Italian literature. At the beginning of *Bovo-Buch*, Levita writes that his book aimed at entertaining women on the long day of *Shabbat*. But what Levita offers, even to the reader today, is much more than mere entertainment. He introduces his fellow Ashkenazim to the complex and rich aesthetics of the Italian literature of his time.[27]

NOTES

[1] A complete list of Levita's works can be found in the classic biography by Weil 1963. This work analyzes more precisely Elia's activity as a specialist of the Hebrew and the Aramean languages. The pages on Yiddish poetry need to be updated.

[2] Weil 1963, 234-238.

[3] Simon 1685, 177

[4] Shmeruk 1988, 123. For a global view of the Italian production of Yiddish books, see the following exhibition catalogue Turniansky & Timm, 2003.

[5] Excerpts of those texts can be found in the anthology edited by Frakes 2004, 193 et sq, 218 et sq.

[6] Dreessen 1981.

[7] Baruchson Arbib 2001, 129-136 and 163-182.

[8] Weil 1963, XIX.

[9] It has been adapted in new Yiddish by Moyshe Knaphays 1962 and translated into English by Smith 2003.

[10] The debate is presented in the Hebrew edition of the text : Shmeruk & Timm 1996, 32-41. It is also treated in the German edition by Timm 1996.

[11] Hrushovsky 1964, 108-146.

[12] Pulci 1997.

[13] See in particular, Folengo 1989 and Aretino 1995.

[14] See *stanzas* 221, 507.

[15] Bakhtine 1970, chap. IV

[16] The Italian version of *Paris e Vienna* has been presented by Babbi 1991.

[17] The relationship between *Pariz un Wiene* and the moral conceptions of the time has been analyzed by Schulz 2000. The author considers the way the body and the senses are idealized, and therefore take on a semantic role. He also stresses that love, conveyed by sight, is always linked to the highest and noblest parts of the human being, in line with the traditional, Aristotelian conception of the Middle Ages.

[18] These two poems have been edited by Frakes in his anthology.

[19] *Pariz un Wiene*, *stanza* 517.

[20] A precise description of Northern Italy Jewish society is given by Bonfil 1991.

[21] Levita's satire of the Jews of Venice has been analyzed by Ricardo Calimani in the context of the reluctance with which Italian and Ashkenazi Jews accepted the arrival of numerous Sephardi Jews in the beginning of the sixteenth century. Calimani 1985, 85.

[22] For the debate in Hebrew literature see Pagis 1976**,** 219, 220, 231, 277, 280-82. See also De Benedetti-Stow1980.

[23] Compare Boccaccio 1982, 74 and *Pariz un Wiene*, stanza 179. The whole prologue on women (stanzas 168-184 is imbued with a Boccaccian spirit of satire).

[24] See in particular the prologues Berni wrote to Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato*'s *canti* XI, XVIII, XLI.

[25] *Pariz un Wiene*, *stanza* 177.

[26] The example of Leone Sommo da Portaleone is particularily interesting. Official writer for the Gonzagas in Mantova, Portaleone composed many plays in Italian there and one important theoretical work on théâtre. At the same time, he was known as the author of the first Hebrew comedy. See Schirman, Leone Sommo 1946, 1965.

[27] For more on the Jewish contribution to the development of thought and literature at that time, the works of Cecil Roth remain important references. Cecil Roth. *The History of the Jews in Italy*. Philadelphia: Jewish publication society of America, 1946 and *The Jews in the Renaissance*. Philadelphia: Jewish publication society of America, 1959.

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