

Creation, Re-creation, and Recreation in an Old Yiddish Romance

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There's a Yiddish joke: Before I speak, I want to say a few words.

I'll be talking today about an Old Yiddish romance, the *Bovo-bukh*, and about its creation in the early sixteenth century—a process that, as we'll see, was really a re-creation. I'll be talking too about the use of this romance not only as recreation in the sense of entertainment, but as a tool for further re-creation or renewal of an always-threatened culture. Because my topic is related to Jewish literature and culture, it's appropriate to mention that on Friday—tomorrow—at sundown commence two of the most important Jewish holidays, which themselves evoke creation and re-creation.¹ One is, of course, the Sabbath (or, as my grandparents, with their Ashkenazi accent, would say, 'shabbas'). This weekly holiday, based in the biblical story of creation, is the earliest and most important of Jewish holidays. Shabbas is also the only holiday directly related to Yahweh himself, who took the seventh day off after his six days of creative labor, and enjoined us to do the same so that we might, through our recreations on that day, re-create the cycle of work and rest that the ur-artisan performed. Traditionally (though not biblically) these recreations include a bath, good clothes, a fine dinner, and—according to a thirteenth-century kabbalistic marriage manual—lovemaking (for scholars, at least) at midnight, when the dinner has been properly digested (*The Holy Letter*, c. 3).

The second major holiday that begins this Friday night is Rosh Hashanah, literally 'head of the year' or new year. It is an annual version of the weekly Sabbath, for it is said to mark the anniversary of creation. However, September is not the first month of the Jewish calendar; that is Nissan, in the spring (mid-March to mid-April), which, as is typical of agrarian economies, marks the start of the agricultural year: the moment when nature re-creates itself and when planting occurs so that human life can re-create or reproduce itself too. Why then do we celebrate Rosh Hashanah in the autumn? This question takes us into the

¹This paper was delivered as the keynote address of the 'Creation / Re-creation' conference, Thursday, 5 September 2002.

heart of re-creation—this time the form of re-creation that shaped Jewish tradition down the ages and, as we will see, shaped the *Bovo-bukh* as well: namely, interpretation. We owe the autumn date of Rosh Hashanah to the interpretation of scholars and administrators whose opinions and commentaries, compiled between the second and eighth centuries of this era, have done so much to mould what is commonly called ‘normative’ or ‘rabbinic’ Judaism. The name of the holiday is an invention of the earliest rabbis, and into it were collapsed several other ancient rituals to produce a ten-day cycle of remembrance and repentance known as the high holidays and culminating in Yom Kippur (which is mentioned in Lev 23:27-32)

Most observant Jews would not be attending a conference on such a doubly august occasion. For me, secular as I am, there is no better way to celebrate this culture and affirm my commitment to it than to speak about it to an audience that might otherwise never hear about one of its best-loved literary monuments.

Having said my few words, now I’ll speak.

First let me outline the plot of the *Bovo-bukh* so that you have a feel for what this literary monument is in itself. Bovo is the hero, born into the January-May marriage of the sixty-year-old Italian count Guidon of Lombardy and a young Burgundian princess. As the author remarks, ‘Her days were pleasant, her nights distressing.’ The wicked young wife engineers the death of her noble old husband, and that of their heir, Bovo, for she has taken a lover and wishes to live unencumbered. The thirteen-year-old Bovo escapes his wicked mother’s death-plot; he is captured by merchants and taken to Flanders, where he finds work as stable boy at the royal castle. Eventually the king’s daughter, Drusiana, falls in love with him, they plight troth, Bovo distinguishes himself in battle against an invading sultan and defeats a rival suitor, Makabrun, who retaliates by arranging Bovo’s death. Again our young hero escapes, this time to Babylonia, where the sultan’s daughter falls in love with him and helps him to escape. Meanwhile, during the year of Bovo’s absence, Drusiana has reluctantly agreed to marry the rival, Makabrun. Of course Bovo arrives back in Flanders just in time to prevent the wedding. The young couple elope into the forest where they consummate their passion and where Drusiana conceives and gives birth to twin boys. Another separation occurs; the hero and heroine have separate adventures, and, after avenging himself on his wicked mother, Bovo winds up in Babylon once again. Convinced that Drusiana has died in the forest, he now accepts the virtuous Muslim princess. But the intermarriage is not to be, for Drusiana reciprocates the wedding rescue, arriving in Babylon, with the twins (who are now about five years old), just in time. All is revealed; the Muslim princess converts to Judaism and weds Bovo’s loyal retainer instead. So justice is done, love conquers all,

mixed marriage is avoided, Bovo succeeds his father-in-law as king of Flanders, and his twin sons become famous warriors and rulers too.

To some of you this plot will seem familiar, and well it might, for it is none other than *Sir Bevis of Hampton*, as the story is known in its Middle English incarnation, and it appears in several European languages from the thirteenth century on. It became the Bovo-book through the good offices of one Elias Levita, who translated it from Italian into Yiddish in 1507.

Before moving on to Levita, whose adventures were nearly as gripping as those of his hero, let me pause to explore the implications of his translation. It is evident that whatever else Jews might have read in the early modern period, and whatever local rabbis might have thought about their community's literary tastes, early modern Jews were reading frivolous chivalric romance. Nor was this a new renaissance development, for romance had formed part of the Jewish reading menu for two or three centuries already. We have a fragment of the anonymous 1279 Hebrew translation of an Italian Arthurian romance (*King Artus*), and there is a mid fourteenth-century Hebrew translation out of Latin of an Alexander romance made by a French scientific scholar, Immanuel ben Jacob Bonfils (*The Book of the Gestis*; Alexander's story, with its journeys into deep space and undersea, would have special interest for an author whose best-known scholarly work was a treatise on astronomy). Among the treasures discovered in the Cairo Genizah was a 1382 ms. containing a Yiddish epic, *Dukus Horant*, derived from the Germanic Kudrun/Hagen cycle.² Obviously these and similar works had recreational value, though Jewish translators and redactors—just like their Christian counterparts—made every effort to surround their literary labors with moral and ethical, or even medical, uplift. For example, the anonymous translator of the Arthurian fragment assures us that he made his translation for two important reasons. The first was

the preservation of my physical well-being, for owing to my sins my troubles have grown and my laments increased, and I am immersed in a sea of perplexed thoughts. Night and day I am continually astounded by events which have passed over me and I fear lest I fall into melancholy, that is madness, to which death is preferable. Therefore I have translated these conversations for myself in order to calm my mind, mitigate my grief, and dispel somewhat the bad times I have experienced.... The second and most important reason for my translation was that sinners will learn the path of repentance and bear in mind their end and will return to ha-shem [the name, i.e., God, a word that cannot be written by religious Jews].

²Linguistically, some consider this work to be in Middle High German. Jean Baumgarten somewhat sidesteps the question in arguing that the work is so judaized that it must be considered Jewish literature (*Introduction* 170). The ms. is now at Cambridge University.

Moreover, even though his Arthurian material includes tournaments, disguise, murder and adultery, the translator reminds us that ‘it is possible to learn wisdom and ethics from these fables concerning a man’s conduct toward himself and towards his fellow man. Therefore they are neither idle nor profane talk’ (*Artus* 10-11).

Indeed, the habit of cultural borrowing long precedes the medieval translator’s earnest apologia, for already from the second century on, in the very heartland of early Jewish literature—Talmud and its related texts—rabbis incorporated into their arguments and commentaries motifs and tales from Greco-Roman myth and legend such as those surrounding the figure of Alexander of Macedon (see Kazis’s introduction to his translation of the medieval Hebrew Alexander romance for an exhaustive discussion of the Alexander material in very early rabbinic literature). Such cultural porousness or hybridity in Hellenic and late classical times is currently being documented in the work of scholars like Rosemary Ruether, Shaye Cohen and Daniel Boyarin, who show that notions of Judaism and Christianity as distinct and competing religions were not firmly in place until the fourth century. What our medieval and renaissance romances show is that even when the distinction and competition were rigidly and institutionally in place, the cultural interpenetration continued.

Elias Levita seems to have needed no such therapeutic function for his work as did his medieval predecessor, and his aim was explicitly recreational rather than salvational. His prologue is a short prayer, praising God and asking for the strength to complete the translation. As for reception, Levita begs for the least an author can hope for: ‘May he help me succeed so that no one laughs at my efforts.’³ Since the work is a comic romance, and meant for amusement, this formulaic request may itself be somewhat tongue-in-cheek. It resembles the last request of the humble Bontsha Schweig, or Bontsha the Silent, in I. L. Peretz’s short story by that name, one of the best-loved and most biting ironic stories in the brilliant corpus of modern Yiddish fiction. In it, the dead Bontsha comes to heaven where he is praised for a lifetime of saintly victimization, poverty, and self-denying silence. What would he like as reward? the angels ask. The man is able to imagine nothing more than a buttered roll. Levita adopts a posture of humility again in his foreword: ‘I, Elias Levita, the writer, humble servant of all pious women, am troubled that several ladies count it ill of me that I have not published some of my Yiddish books for them so that they might read them on shabbes and on holidays and thus amuse themselves.’

Why does Levita address himself to the reading needs of Jewish women

³I use the translation by Jerry Smith (Fenestra Books, 2003), whom I thank for making it available to me before publication. It is the first translation into English, and the version used here is Smith’s prose revision of the version in his doctoral dissertation (Cornell University, 1965).

especially? He was not the only Jewish author to do so; the trope was formulaic (Baumgarten, *Introduction* 80, 210). This tells us that enough Jewish women were literate to ensure Levita a market for his work, and that Yiddish was thought of as a women's language. A fusion of various German dialects with some Hebrew, Aramaic, romance and, eventually, Slavic components, Yiddish began to show distinctive linguistic features around 1000.⁴ By Levita's time, Yiddish had become a lingua franca among Ashkenazim, the northern European Jews.⁵ Italian Jews whose roots went back centuries, even to early Roman times, did not usually speak Yiddish; they spoke the Italian dialect of their city, and perhaps a Judaeo-Italian as well. (Thus Primo Levi refers to 'the curious Judeo-Piedmontese speech' of his region.) Nor would Iberian refugees speak Yiddish. Thus Levita apparently aimed at German immigrants to Italy, and to Ashkenazim back in Germany as well. The language has long been called '*mamaloshn*': mother tongue, and in Levita's time it was also known as '*weib-taytsch*', or (literally) woman-German. This feminine association had complex social causes that continued down through much of the twentieth century. Women normally did not attend *cheder* (Hebrew school) and were not usually literate in Hebrew, the elite textual language of Bible, liturgy and learned commentary. What women knew of Torah or the rest of the bible would likely be from a Yiddish or other vernacular translation: Spanish or Ladino (the judaized version of Spanish), French or Provençal, Italian or Greek. The most famous of these in Yiddish was the *Tsenerene*, a compendium of translation, commentary, *midrash* and Talmudic story. Individual biblical books were also published separately; Levita himself translated Psalms into Yiddish: it appeared in 1545, the first Yiddish book printed in Italy.

Thus although Jewish men also spoke Yiddish, and of course some Jewish men did not know Hebrew, still the facts that women did not normally know Hebrew well enough to converse in it, and that Yiddish was the ordinary language of domesticity and business, led to what Naomi Seidman has called 'the sexual politics of Hebrew and Yiddish'. It was a long-lived trope, for when the great Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem died in 1916 in Brooklyn, his gravestone was inscribed with an epitaph written by the author proclaiming himself a simple Jew who wrote Yiddish 'far vayber, / Un farn prostn folk' (for women and for the

⁴As Benjamin Harshav points out, it was Max Weinreich who developed the theory of Yiddish as a fusion language (28); Baumgarten, *Introduction*, provides a thorough discussion of the earlier 'corrupted German' hypothesis. This magisterial study is currently being translated into English by Jerold Frakes.

⁵A comprehensive overview of Ashkenazi language, culture and social organization is found in *Mille ans de cultures ashkénazes*. Jews living in Muslim-ruled lands were Sephardim, after *sefarad*, the Hebrew name for Muslim-dominated Spain. Their language, culture and ritual were somewhat different from those of northern European Jews. See also Robert Bonfils 239-41.

common people). A few years later, from the 1920s onward, Yiddish writers worldwide would protest the suppression of Yiddish in Palestine by settlers who considered it an effeminate language. Many Zionists favored the supposedly 'virile' Hebrew, which thus became, for the first time in two millennia, a vernacular for Jews.⁶

⁶Hebrew had disappeared as a vernacular by about 200 CE and had been in decline for centuries before that as a consequence of the Babylonian exile. By the 3rd century CE Hebrew had been 'decisively supplanted by Aramaic' as lingua franca for Jews and others in the Near and Middle East, though many spoke Greek or Persian as well, depending on where they lived in the Hellenic, Roman, Persian or Islamic empires. Aramaic was eventually replaced (about the 8th century) by Arabic for the Sephardic Jewish population, including those in Muslim-controlled parts of Spain. Jews would also speak the local vernacular (Italian, French) and possibly a judaized version of it, such as Ladino in Spanish-speaking countries (Alexander). In modern Israel, the Yiddish-Hebrew controversy was accompanied by a parallel stylistic debate between European polished rhetoric and a new, blunt mode of address (Katriel). This was partly an ideological issue, partly linguistic, as Hebrew lacked many words, expressions and social formulae of European vernaculars.

I do want to add, though, that for Levita the woman question is not one of audience only but of ethics. Women's sexuality is fully acknowledged in his romance, as it is in many a non-Jewish medieval romance; women are responsible moral agents, with good and bad among them, just as in life; Drusiana is not only clever and literate but an accomplished administrator and advisor to her father; Bovo helps deliver his sons and he cooks when Drusiana is recovering from childbirth; the surest mark of a villain is to strike a woman, even in an argument. Clearly, then, the lessons for the woman reader are not simply those of humility and forbearance—such as explicitly articulated in Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) or Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and *Clerk's Tale*—but rather those of personal and ethical development: a humanist ethos for women as well as men.

Despite the apparent humility of his prefaces, Elias Levita was no Bontsha Schweig, and his authorial presence is far from modest. His style is colloquial, ironic, full of interjections and sly asides. Some of these help create the ethical dimension of his work, as when Bovo's adventures with dragons and giants are dismissed this way: 'I'd rather not describe these things. I think they are all lies.' Other comments enlist audience response as when the assertive Drusiana displays her breasts to Bovo with the Yiddish equivalent of 'How do you like these apples?' Bovo turns away embarrassed, and Levita writes, 'That would never have happened to Elia Bachur!' Later, when the young couple make love in the woods, Levita jokes, 'Drusiana cried out as though she had come upon a thief in the stables, but this thief stabbed her without a struggle, for she offered no resistance. I think you know what I mean'.

Levita was well entitled to display authorial confidence in his interjections, for even in 1507, when composing the *Bovo-bukh*, he was a well-known young scholar, and by 1541, when preparing his book for print, he was the foremost Jewish scholar in Europe. In his foreword Levita reminds the reader that he has 'already composed, published, and sent out into the world eight or nine books in the Holy Language' and now, near the end of his life—as he says, 34 years after he first wrote the book—he plans to print all his Yiddish books and songs, 'one after another, each and every one, as many as time allows'. What were these works in Yiddish and Hebrew, and what was the life now drawing to its end?

Levita was born in 1469 in a German village near Nuremberg. During his early twenties, he moved to Italy, long a destination for mercantile and scholarly Jews; but doubtless also because of intensified persecution of Jews in Germany during the fifteenth century (Hsia). He settled first in Padua, where a colony of German émigrés had created an important center of Talmudic studies. Here, in 1504, Levita published an edition of a twelfth-century Hebrew grammar along with his own commentary, and here he composed, in 1507, the *Bovo-bukh*, which circulated in manuscript form but was not printed until 1541 in Germany. In 1509

Levita and his family moved to Venice, taking advantage of a new wartime admission policy for Jews (Bonfils 56). There he worked as a copyist or scribe, a tutor of Hebrew, and a writer. In 1515 Levita's scholarly reputation was rewarded with a very handsome invitation. Giles of Viterbo, the famous scholar, preacher, and leader of the Augustinian order—soon to become a cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church—asked Levita to be his private tutor and scribe. With his family Levita moved to Rome to live in his patron's palace, with plenty of time for his own work. In this peaceful and prosperous setting Levita produced several works on the Hebrew language and script, including a controversial study of Hebrew vowel-pointing which demonstrated that the vowels in Biblical manuscripts were added by post-biblical scribes, not given to Moses at Sinai. Given the often-ambiguous nature of consonantal Hebrew, this meant that traditional rabbinic vowel-pointing and thus interpretation of many passages was open to question. Needless to say, this work aroused rabbinic opposition, but the thesis is today undisputed. Levita's connections with Catholic patrons and printers, along with his use of secular Christian materials, can only have intensified the resentment provoked by his controversial scholarship; accordingly, Baumgarten suggests that Levita's position among Italian Jews must have been an ambiguous one at best (*Introduction* 206).

Levita's 'pax romana' lasted only a few years. Once again uprooted by war, Levita and his family left Rome, resettling in Venice in 1529. But it was a very different Venice than the one he had left, for during his absence the city council had in 1516 decreed that Jews must leave their homes and move to one part of the city, already known as the ghetto (a word of debatable etymology, but long predating the 1516 decree: see Wirth and Calimani). In the ghetto, Levita would have been considered part of the 'nazione tedesca', or community of Germanic Jews; there was also a Levantine or Sephardic nation, as well as Jews from Greece, Italy, Portugal and elsewhere. In the city, Levita worked as editor at an important press, which, although Christian-owned, published several of Levita's works during the 1530s. Levita would have had to return to the ghetto every night before the curfew and before the gates were locked. This scene of writing was not unique to him; a few decades later the famous composer Salomon de' Rossi would compose his madrigals in the Mantua ghetto, and many other writers and artists continued their work, particularly in the area of ceremonial art, in the ghetto.

Other invitations came, including one to lecture on Hebrew at the Sorbonne, but Levita didn't go; the Jews had been expelled from France a century and a half earlier, in 1394, and perhaps Levita wished to make a tacit statement. At any rate the refusal was not from reluctance to travel, for in 1540 he returned to Germany to help run a newly founded Hebrew press in the village of Isny. It was this press that published Levita's late works, particularly his three dictionaries (including a Hebrew-Yiddish one), along with second editions of his earlier grammatical

books and, of course, the *Bovo-bukh*. Another important ‘romanzo cavalleresco’ is attributed to Levita: *Paris un Viene* is also translated from an Italian source and shows his distinctive style; it wasn’t printed until 1594 and never had the fame of *Bovo*.⁷ In 1542 Levita returned to Venice to work with another new Hebrew press, and there he died in 1549, aged 81.

So this was a long and adventurous life, one that both intersects and exemplifies several important cultural developments of the early modern period. The two I’d like to focus on seem contradictory: they are, on one hand, popular antijudaism and, on the other, Christian Hebraism. Despite the apparent disjunction, these two early modern trends are but opposite sides of the same coin. It’s quite possible that Levita left Germany because of a sharp increase in persecution of Jews during the fifteenth century, especially the infamous blood libel, in which Jews were accused of kidnapping and murdering Christian children to get their blood for ritual purposes. Although the first documented accusation of ritual murder occurred in England in 1148—the case of little William of Norwich—and other cases occurred in various countries thereafter, nonetheless there was a strong revival of this trend in German-speaking lands during the early modern period, carried not only in actual accusations, trials, torture and executions but also in a widespread discourse that included sermons, chronicles, drama, woodcuts and paintings, church art, ballads and story collections (Hsia, *passim*). It was in Nuremberg, the city nearest to Levita’s village, that the anti-Jewish carnival plays first surfaced in the 1440s (Hsia 62-65) and where, in 1493, a particularly gory woodcut of a ritual murder was published in an important world chronicle (Bonfils 27).

This same period was the age of ghettoization, and I want to stress that the ghetto was not a medieval phenomenon but a renaissance one. The medieval city might have a Jewish quarter or ‘jewry’, but this was neither compulsory nor exclusive nor even necessarily confined any more than a Jewish neighbourhood is today. A few European towns had attempted segregation earlier, partly in delayed response to recommendations made at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. But the century from about 1460 to 1560 saw ghettoization in major cities. In the early 1460s, Frankfort city council forced Jews to move to a segregated area; in 1495, Krakow’s Jews were compelled to move to a suburb, Kazimiercz; in 1516, Venice; in 1556, Rome; in 1570, Vienna; and within a few decades apartheid became the norm in Europe.

Levita did not live to see the apostasy of his grandson, Shlomo Romano, —

⁷Like *Bovo*, this story exists in many languages. The complete Yiddish version was not known until 1986, when it was discovered by Anna Maria Babbi in its 1594 Veronese edition. A facsimile appeared in 1988, a first modern edition in 1995, and a critical edition with extensive apparatus has been edited by Erika Timm (*Paris un Wiene*). Caxton’s translation from the French was edited by MacEdward Leach for EETS.

who, like many converts, became one of the most vicious opponents of his former religion. His arguments against Hebrew books probably helped Pope Julius III in his decision to burn the Talmud and other texts in 1553 in Rome and, later that same year, in Venice; ironically, some of Levita's books were doubtless in the bonfire. In 1555, shortly after Levita's death, the Jews of Rome were forced to enter a new, exclusively Jewish quarter—a mere four decades after Levita had been scholar-in-residence at the Cardinal's palace!

The Christian humanist study of Hebrew may appear counterposed to this intensification of lay and popular antijudaic activity, but is not necessarily so. For many humanists and religious reformers, the study of Hebrew was far from a disinterested intellectual pursuit. For some it was a tool in the semi-rationalistic struggle to purify religion of its superstitious and magical accretions whether Catholic or Jewish; thus kabala, *kashrut* and circumcision would be as deplorable to the reformer as pilgrimage or saint-worship. For others, learning Hebrew opened the way to combat Christianity's oldest rival on its own ground: 'the better to confound the Jews', as it was put by an Italian student of Hebrew, the Florentine diplomat and orator Gianozzo Manetti (Bergquist 228).

Not only Hebrew but also Yiddish endured the attention of Christian reformers, who saw the vernacular as a means to convert Jews. Thus gospel, Christian prayer books and even missals—laying out the liturgy of the mass—were translated into Yiddish, mostly after Levita's death. But even during his lifetime, reformers blamed Yiddish as a criminal argot: Martin Luther wrote a book on this subject in 1528, basing it on a work published already in 1510 (Baumgarten, *Introduction* 34).

I want to wind up by sketching some tentative answers to two questions. One is: what did Elias Levita create when he re-created Sir Bevis of Hampton as Bovo d'Antona? The other is: how did Levita's creation participate in the re-creation of Jewish culture down the ages, not only as part of its entertainment or recreational menu, but in the larger sense of helping a culture to define itself and to survive?

The Italian source of Levita's famous book was probably the 1497 edition of a stanzaic version of the well-known poem (Rosenzweig). I am not going to offer a comparison here but will confine myself to some observations about how Levita transformed the work and how he helped to transform Yiddish poetry and the Jewish sensibility.

Like its source, Levita's romance is stanzaic, in the ABABABCC rhyme scheme known as *ottava rima*. The form was probably invented by Giovanni Boccaccio in the fourteenth century, and in Levita's time had already been popularized in the verse epics of Tasso and Ariosto. Chaucerians will recognize the form as the 'Monk's Tale' stanza, though Levita's metrics are more flexible, or more irregular, than those of the other authors just mentioned. What Levita's verse most importantly is not, though, is rhymed couplets—the typical form of

earlier German and Yiddish epic. For example, both the *Shmuel bukh* and *Dukus Horant* are composed in simple quatrains rhymed AABB—a form called the ‘Nibelungenstrophe’ after its most famous exemplar and basically amounting to rhymed couplets. Thus Jean Baumgarten writes of Levita’s ‘double rupture’ with Germany: by translating from Italian, Levita affirmed a separation from the Germanic cradle of Yiddish epic; and by introducing the Italian verse form into Yiddish he liberated Yiddish poetry from the meter typical of Germanic material (Baumgarten, *Mille ans* 441-48).

Levita reshaped his material in many ways for a Jewish audience. To begin with, the characters are mainly Jewish—not obtrusively so, not even specifically observant, but definitely Jewish. For example, Bovo is twice urged by a sultan to convert to Islam. (Parenthetically I want to note that this Islamic theme is no mere exoticism, but reflects the very real threat, especially in Venice, of a Turkish invasion.) The first time he rudely responds, ‘I shit on you and your heathen religion’, but the second time, in Babylon itself, Bovo’s refusal makes use of a traditional Jewish refutation of Christianity, here rather unsuitably applied to Islam: ‘I wouldn’t trade a living [god] for a dead [one].’ The evil mother is not explicitly said to be Catholic, but she is sent to a convent for the rest of her life. A monastery is shown to be a storehouse of luxury goods in a time of general poverty (reminding one perhaps of Chaucer’s Prioress with her white bread and ale and underscoring the lack of communal charity among Christians). The monks’ wooden shoes help identify them as probably Franciscans, major organizers of antijudaic campaigns in Italy and elsewhere; their store of goods is in stark contrast to their ideal of poverty. Yiddish and Hebrew words abound in the text, many of them recognizable today, among them *sholem*, *mazel tov*, *tokhes*, *oy vay*, *ponyim*, *goy*. Drusiana’s aunt explicitly identifies herself as a Jew and swears by the ‘*boyre oylem*’ (bore olam: creator of the world). The twin sons born in the forest are circumcised with a wonderful feast when they and Drusiana return to her father’s castle. The double wedding in Babylonia has not only a *chuppah* but fifty *minyans* (prayer quorums) and so is indubitably a Jewish wedding. The fifty *minyans* would have seemed like a major luxury at a time when many tiny village communities would have had trouble scraping together one!

Important too is the kind of Jewish hero Levita presents, and the kind of Judaism his hero is loyal to. Bovo is a muscle-Jew, to borrow a Zionist phrase.⁸ He is no sensitive scholar; there is not even a reference to a *bar mitzvah*. On the contrary, his coming-of-age at thirteen consists of escaping his mother’s murderous plans and being sold into slavery. He is the complete chivalric hero, resourceful, a testosterone-laden teen skilled in the arts of combat, always ready to fight or to reply with a clever retort. Moreover, the easy intercultural relations

⁸This is the term invented by Max Nordau, a Zionist leader in the early 1900s, who saw urban culture as decadent.

suggest a somewhat flexible approach. Bovo nearly marries a virtuous Muslim princess (much like Parzival before him with the beautiful Belakane); the intermarriage is averted but not with any expressions of horror or condemnation. Nor are all the villains non-Jewish: one of them, Orion, is a brutal and mercenary traitor, but since he is married to Drusiana's aunt, he is presumably also Jewish.

At the same time, Bovo's loyalty, discretion and general ethical development are equally complete, so that he is well able to act as the instrument of justice and morality. He is a model husband, not disdaining the domestic chores of cooking or caring for his newborn infants. As a model for Jewish youth of the period, Bovo represents a bold assertion of Jewish culture, validating the presence and the culture not only of scriptural Jews, who were acceptable to Christians, but of Jews in every European city, who weren't. Especially during a period when many Jews converted to Christianity—including, as we have seen, Levita's own kin—it may be that the scholar saw a somewhat flexible humanistic Judaism, expressed in the adventures of a brave, attractive young hero, as a way to hold the younger generation.

The romance was reprinted many times down the centuries, in verse and in prose, in Kiev, Warsaw, Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Vilna and elsewhere. Indicative of its popularity is the fact that I first heard of it not through scholarship, but anecdotally from a friend who had grown up in a Yiddish-speaking family in the Bronx. He is not the only one to have heard parents and grandparents speak of it; indeed the text has left its mark on vocabulary with the Yiddish word '*bobe-maises*', which some mistakenly translate as 'grandmother tales' but which actually means 'Bovo-stories', or extravagant tall tales. That so few—Jews or non-Jews—know the work today is due, I believe, to the loss of its audience in this century, to holocaust, pogrom and assimilation.

Centuries after Levita died, one of the great Yiddish poets of our day, the Vilna ghetto and resistance fighter Abraham Sutzkever, planned to translate this romance into modern Yiddish; the war interfered and the project was not taken up. At the same time, another major Yiddish poet, Hirsh Glik, also of Vilna, composed a song that became the anthem of Jewish resistance to the Nazis. The title of the poem is 'Zug nit keinmol', after the lyric's opening line: 'Zug nit keinmol das du gehst den letzten weg'—never say that you are walking the last road. But the refrain of the lyric is 'Mir seinen doh!'—we are here. This 'mir seinen doh!' is the deep message I read in the *Bovo-bukh*, written by a man who would experience the first ghetto four centuries before the ghettos of our day. In their own way, Yiddishists who are beginning to study and translate the wonderful literature of this culture are saying the same thing, and I'm happy to be saying it here, on the appropriate holidays, and in a way I hope Elias Levita would have approved.

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