**Old Yiddish Literature**

The chapter of this textbook will focus on Old Yiddish literature, and its historical context in European literature. The development and changes in Yiddish literature reflect the creation of a growing and distinct Jewish culture.

**What is Yiddish?**

Yiddish is a combination if Hebrew, German and Russian, and is written in the Hebrew alphabet. It was developed by the Ashkenazic Jews, who lived in central Europe, but who were dispersed to the east as they were exiled over the medieval time period. However, it was spoken centrally in Germany. In this chapter, when referring to Jewish culture, we are referencing the culture of the Ashkenazic Jews.

Yiddish was originally considered a common and uneducated language, primarily for reading by women, who were not sent to Yeshiva. However, it was commonplace and spoken by most. Eventually, it developed just from a language read commonly into a language used by rabbinical scholars, and then a language used in the popular culture of the time.

This chapter will trace the history of Yiddish literature through five texts.

**“Virtuous Joseph” 1382**

This poem, written in Yiddish in 1382, is about the Old Testament story of Joseph. Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers, who are jealous of him. This poem is about Joseph when he is in slavery, while his master is Potiphar. Potiphar’s wife makes advances on Joseph, but Joseph, in his piety, refuses. She eventually accuses him of advancing on her. This poem is about the contrast of his piety with her evil sexuality.

This text represents the beginning more pious texts among Yiddish literature. It is a midrash, which means it is a supplemental text to the torah. It is meant to had color and flavor to the text, in a way to make it more impactful to its readers. For example, in the following passage, this is evident.

He served them mead and clear wine apace.

He was deeply ashamed, with a crimson face.

Joseph poured with his snow white hands,

His eyes on the guests, his heart with God, and

After he poured, their goblets were at their lips,

But they stared at him without taking sips.

Not only does this poem bring colorful description to the story of Joseph, but it emphasizes his purity and devotion to god in descriptive terms, such as “his snow white hands”.

Furthermore, it is necessary to note the mention of “his snow white hands”. Though Yiddish texts were obviously written for a Jewish audience, texts often contained ‘European’ and ‘Christian’ elements. For example, fair white hands were a European symbol of purity, as was Joseph’s golden hair, as described in the poem. The poem also describes a hierarchy situation, with Joseph attending to the women, which is similar to a court description one would see of European court. The Midrash did not just bring stories to life, it brought them into the modern day for people to further connect with the situation.

However, this element of European traits in Yiddish texts is not unique to Midrash, and is noticeable in many Yiddish texts.

**“My Dear Daughter: Rabbi Benjamin Slonik and the Education of Jewish Women” 16th Century**

This passage is an example of the Yiddish texts written specifically for women. This text outlines the three laws that pious women must follow- Niddah, Challah, and lighting of the candles. For those that don’t know, Niddah is the ritual cleansing that women perform after their menstrual cycle, while challah is the sacrifice of the dough of the bread that women make for the Sabbath. The lighting of the candles is the ritual when light a candle everyday.

Rabbi Slonik recommends that women read this book every month, so they will remember their duties as pious Jewish women. This text relates to the roles of Jewish women at the time, and is a further example of the pious texts written in Yiddish. While the above Yiddish was meant for scholarly and education of Jewish people in general, this particular text was just written for women.

Tsenerene, or the woman bibles, were similar to Rabbi Slonik’s book. They were exclusively written in Yiddish, and were intended to be read by women every Sabbath. They especially focused on the religious issues that were critical to women.

By looking at these two religious texts, it is clear to see that Yiddish was critical to the religious education of all Jewish people. Unlike the other European languages at the time, this language was specifically for Jewish individuals. With the increasing popularity of the printing press in the 16th century, Yiddish texts diversified from pious texts. It is important to remember the high literacy rate of Jewish people at the time, as education was considered critical for both men and women.

***Bovo Buch* 1507**

The *Bovo Buch*  is one such example of these books that became widely distributed after the printing press grew in popularity. This novel, written by Elia Levita, describes the adventures of Bovo, a Jewish Knight, and his love, the beautiful Drusiana. Bovo overcomes a great deal of odds, evening after being held captive by an Arabian Sheik, to marry Drusiana.

This story, which was originally Italian, was written into Yiddish by Elia Levita. This book, which is a chanson de geste, is a type of medieval literature that were typically written as epic poems.

Bovo is written as a Jewish character, as are most of the other characters. However, their religion is mentioned in passing, and is unessential to the plot. There are many European Christian themes throughout the text. Besides the courts and knights, there is a theme of the crusades. The people who hold Bovo captive are referred to as heathens to be conquered, which follows the theme of the crusades. Furthermore, the beauty of the characters is described as European, with blond hair and fair skin highly valued. Chivalry is also a central theme to the Bovo Buch, which is another main aspect in Christian Medieval literature.

However, all literature for the purposes of entertainment was not just fictional.

***Gluckel of Hameln* 1646-1724**

This unique text represents another type of Yiddish text of the time, autobiography. However, a prominent businesswoman living in Hamburg Germany wrote this selection, and it documents her life. Gluckel is unique, as she appeared to be active in her husbands business, and she documented her life thoroughly.

Though the timeline in her stories does not really match up, as many scholars point out, it does depict many aspects of Jewish life at the time. It shows her marriage, raising children, and participating in business. It also shows her piety and devotion, which was typical for a woman at the time.

With this story, it is important to look at the growth of Yiddish literature overtime. At first, it was just religious texts, though it grew into popular literature with the birth of the printing press. Yiddish literature became so commonplace that a woman like Gluckel could write and publish her memoirs.

**“Anonymous Arthurian Legend” 1789**

Finally, we look at this “Arthurian” legend, which is outside of the early modern period. This story is a parody of the Arthurian legends of a couple of centuries past. Arthurian legends were the legends surrounding King Arthur and his knights of the roundtable.

This story is critical as a capstone as we discuss the development Yiddish literature over the early modern period. Though written in Yiddish, there is no Jewish aspect to this text. It is an entertaining piece of literature that mocks the Yiddish and medieval stories and values of the past.

**Why is Yiddish Literature Important?**

As illustrated by the Arthurian legend parody above, Yiddish literature expanded to the point that it did not even need to include Jewish themes to be a Jewish text. This change over time is important when understanding Yiddish texts and Jewish culture, because it conversely shows at once the secularization and assimilation of Jewish culture but also the development of a distinct Jewish culture, complete with its own literature.

Yiddish literature is important for a number of reasons. Not only does it reflect the changing Jewish culture of the time, but it also reflects how Jewish people integrated into Christian Medieval society.

Sources:

<http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Language/Yiddish>

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