EARLY MODERN WORKSHOP: Jewish History Resources

Volume 6: Reading across Cultures: The Jewish Book and Its Readers in the Early Modern Period, 2009, The Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

Early modern Yiddish readers
Immoderately addicted to rhyme?

Ruth von Bernuth, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, US

ABSTRACT: Roughly one third of Old Yiddish literature is based on traceable European literary sources, mainly German. Given how close Old Yiddish is to Early New High German, some of these Old Yiddish texts with European sources feel like mere transcriptions, others more like legitimate translations and yet others more like free adaptations. From the Yiddish reader's perspective, the texts become accessible through transcription into Hebrew characters and more accessible the more that the translator engages the text as representative Jewish reader. A large proportion of these Yiddish books with German sources are prose novels—a genre newly popular with German readers of the time. A good example is the Schildbürgerbuch, the classic account of goings-on in a fictitious city of fools, first published as the Lalebuch in Strasbourg in 1597, and, with minor revisions, as the Schildbürgerbuch in Frankfurt in 1598. The language and mood of the Schildbürgerbuch were brought up to date in a rewritten edition, attributed to one "Pomponius Filtzhut," which made its appearance around 1698. This Filtzhut version inspired a literal rendering into Yiddish, which appeared in Amsterdam circa 1700. A second Yiddish translation, more spirited and more influential, was published in 1727, again in Amsterdam. These 18th-century Yiddish versions of the Schildbürgerbuch constitute the earliest Jewish literary antecedents for the wise men of Chelm, an invented tradition dating from the end of the 19th century. At around the same time (1890), this second Yiddish edition of the Schildbürgerbuch was incurring the disapproval of the scholar of German literature, Ernst Jeep, who dismisses the fondness for rhyme exhibited throughout the translation as nothing short of a rhyming mania ("Reimwut"). Against the background of the German editions of 1598 and ca.1698 and the first Yiddish edition of ca. 1700, the presentation will look at the rhyming material that is new to this alleged worst case of an apparent proclivity of late early modern Yiddish literary taste. The talk will ask whether this versification deserves a diagnosis quite as pathological-sounding as “Reimwut” and whether it is indeed the
great flaw of the Yiddish version or one of its merits. In addition, we will take this as a point of departure from which at least to pose the bigger question of just how pervasive and significant the rhyming couplet is in Old Yiddish literature, and for how long this remains true. Finally, we will consider how this compares to German literature of the period, wondering how to account for any differences between the two literatures in terms of apparent consumer preference for rhymed or unrhymed prose.

This presentation is for the following text(s):

- Wonderful, adventuresome and highly comical stories and deeds of the world-famous people of Schildburg in Mesopotamia beyond Utopia
- Wonderful, strange, entertaining and amusing stories and deeds of the world-famous people of Schildburg
- Wonderful, strange, entertaining and highly comical stories and deeds of the world-famous people of Schildburg

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Among the commonest publications of the early modern period, yet among the least likely to survive, even in single copies of what may have been quite large editions, are the so-called chapbooks, short works inexpensively printed in small format, and characteristically distributed by itinerant booksellers. One of them that is well-attested in many editions and versions, however, is *Das Lalebuch*, a collection of stories that made its print debut in 1597. It describes the antics of the wise men of fictitious Laleburg in mythical “Misnopotamia, which is beyond Utopia.” The book contains 45 chapters, which record the rise and the fall of the Lalen (*lalein* in Greek, *lallen* in modern German, means to babble or prattle), or, more precisely, how the Lalen developed from the greatest of sages to greatest of fools, and, then, after making their hometown a byword for folly, how they dispersed, spreading foolishness all over the world.

A second edition appeared just a year later, in 1598, printed by Paul Brachfeld in Frankfurt-am-Main. Still anonymous, the *Lalebuch* had undergone some significant changes. The name of the locale had changed from Laleburg to Schildburg (“shield town”), which it remained in the overwhelming majority of subsequent editions. Between the end of the 16th century and the end of the 18th century, there were more than 30 German editions of the *Schildbürgerbuch*.

One of the most innovative versions of the *Schildbürgerbuch* to appear during its long run of great popularity dates from the latter part of the 17th century, its editor giving himself the facetious nom de plume Pomponius Filtzhut (i.e., felt hat). The Filtzhut edition gives the Renaissance original a comprehensive modernization. The first known edition of the Filtzhut *Schildbürgerbuch* features neither place nor date of publication, but the catalog of the British Library supposes 1698 to be the probable year of printing, in view of the dated work with which their copy was bound. The German version of Filtzhut appeared in at least two further printings, from one of which the sample chapter 43 is chosen (text 1).
This Filtzhut version inspired a literal rendition in Yiddish, which appeared in Amsterdam, circa 1700, under the title *Vunder zeltsame kurzveilige lustige geshikhte un daten der velt bekanten shild burger* (Wonderful, strange, entertaining and amusing stories and deeds of the world-famous people of Schildburg). A second Yiddish edition followed in 1727, with a similar title: *Vunder seltsame kurzveylige unt rekht lekherlikhe geshikhte unt daten der velt bekanten shild burger ... oyz der hoykh teytsher galkhes sprakh oyf yudish teytsh* (Wonderful, strange, entertaining and highly comical stories and deeds of the world-famous people of Schildburg ... from the Roman-character German into Yiddish). It, too, was printed in Amsterdam. A third Yiddish edition was printed in Offenbach in 1777 and a fourth in Fürth in 1798.

The first Yiddish edition is, in effect, a mere transliteration of the Roman characters of German script into the Hebrew characters of pre-modern Jewish literacy, with the addition of a few Hebrew-derived words. The sample chapter contains only one such Hebraism, translating “family” as *mishpokhe* (text 2). Moreover, some of the few points of divergence between the German of ca. 1698 and the Yiddish of 1700 may be accounted for by the possibility that the German source for the Yiddish translation was another conjectured early printing of Filtzhut, now lost but maybe even earlier than the one that survives.

The second edition is in more spirited Yiddish and is more of a bona fide translation. That is to say, this edition contains a more substantial number of changes, small as they are, both in style and in content. The sample chapter gives a typical example of the 1727 revision, where the foolishness is underscored even more vigorously than in the source (text 3). Another difference, but one that will not be evident from the English translation here, is that the moral, or, rather, punch-line, is now presented for the first time in rhyme. In addition, the 1727 edition features a new epilogue in rhyme (text 4).

The four 18th century Yiddish versions of the *Schildbürgerbuch* are important not only as witnesses of popular reading matter shared by early modern Christians and Jews but also as the earliest antecedents in Jewish literature of the wise men of Chelm, who, as famous and as quintessentially Jewish as they are now, do not put in an appearance until the end of the 19th century, but whose own antics emulate those of the Schildburgers—and transmit specific stories from the Schildburg canon—down to the present day.

**Bibliography**

bib goes here
Text 1


p. 140-142

Chapter 43: How a man of Schildburg brought his son to school, and what happened there.

It is said that one should not allow a child’s youth to slip by, but, rather, one should start training him early, just as one would a young sapling. Once, it happened that a man of Schildburg wanted to make the most of his son’s youth, so he led him into town, spent 18 pennies on buying him a pair of shoes, and then brought him straight to the principal of the school to give him an education. The principal asked: “Doesn't he know anything?” “No,” said the father. “How old is he?” asked the principal next. “He’s thirty,” replied the father. “He’s as old as that and he hasn’t learnt anything?” said the principal. “What a boor,” said the father; “what could one possibly learn in just 30 years? I am now
65 and a day and what I know isn’t worth a shit.” “It is not going to be easy for him to learn anything now,” said the principal. At this point, someone opened the door to the classroom and the Schildburger caught a glimpse of one of the boys getting birched by a teacher. “Well,” he said, “there is no need for this son of mine to become a serious scholar; that’s not in our family. Just let him become as proficient as that with the cane (meaning the professor), and it’ll be just as good as if he were crammed full of shit [i.e., book learning].” “We shall do our best to educate your son,” said the headmaster and called for the 30-year-old bunny rabbit to enter. “Good,” said the father, “but do make it fast, because I’m going over to the blacksmith to get a shoe put on my horse and then I want to take him home again straight after that.” “Take him back right now,” said the principal, “because there is nothing I can do in that amount of time.” And so it was that the father took his little son by the hand and steered him back to mother.
Das drey und viertzigste Capitel.

Wie ein Schildbürger seinen Sohn in die Schule führte, und was sich da begeben.

Demnach man die Jugend nicht versäumen, sondern zeitlich als einen jungen Baum ziehen soll, als wolte ein Schildbürger seinem Sohn auch die Jugend wohl lassen anlegen. Derhalben nahm er ihn mit sich in die Stadt, kaufte ihn ein paar Schuh vor 18 Ggr. hiermit brachte er ihn zum Schulmeister, anhaltende, daß er ihn lehren solte. Der Schulmeister fragte: Ob er noch nichts könte? Nein, sagte der Vater. Wie alt ist er: fragte der Schulmeister ferner? er ist 30 Jahr alt: sagte der Vater. Jst er so alt, sprach der
Schulmeister, und hat noch nichts gelernet? Was den Knipffel sagte der Vater, was solte einer in 30 Jahren lernen? ich bin nun 65 Jahr und 1 Tag alt und kan dennoch nicht so viel, als ein Dv. werth ist. Soll er etwas lernen, sagte der Schulmeister, so wird es schwer zugehen.

Und als indessen die Schulstubenthür aufgegangen war, und der Schildbürger ungefehr gesehen, wie der Professor einen Knaben mit Ruthen gestrichen, sagte er: Dieser mein Sohn darf eben nicht so gar gelehrt und geschickt werden, dann unser Geschlecht giebt es nicht. Wann er nur ein solcher Schwinger (den Professor vermeyndend) werden mag, so hat er schon genug, als ob er vollgeschmissen wäre. Wir wollen unser bestes an ihm thun, sagte der Schulmeister, hieß darauf das 30jährige Hänselein hinein gehen. Ja, sagte der Vater, ihr müsset es kurz machen, ich wolte ihn gerne wieder mit heim nehmen. Ich will nur zum Hufschmidt gehen und beschlagen lassen, denn will ich ihn wiederholen. So nimm ihn, sagte der Schulmeister jetzt wieder mit dir, dann in so kurtzer Zeit kann ich nichts mit ihm ausrichten. Also nahm der Vater sein Söhnlein bey der Hand und führte ihn wieder zur Mutter.

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Text 2

Vunder zeltsame kurtsveilige lustige geshikhte un daten der velt bekanten shild burger, Amsterdam around 1700.

Chapter 43: How a man of Schildburg brought his son to school, and what happened there.

It is said that one should not allow a child’s youth to slip by, but, rather, one should start training and teaching him early, just as one would a young sapling. Once, it happened that a well-known man of Schildburg wanted to make the most of his son’s youth, so he led him by the hand into town, spent 18 pennies on buying him first a pair of shoes, and then brought him straight to the principal of the school to give him an education. Among other things, the principal asked: “Doesn’t he know anything?” “No,” said the father. “How old is he?” asked the principal next. “He’s thirty,” replied the father. “He’s as old as that and he hasn’t learnt anything?” said the principal. “What a boor,” said the father; “what could one possibly learn in just 30 years? I am now 65 and a day and what I know isn’t worth a shit.” “It is not going to be easy for him to learn anything now,” said the principal. At this point, someone opened the door to the classroom and the Schildburger caught a glimpse of one the boys getting birched by a teacher. “Well,” he said, “there is no need for this son of mine to become a serious scholar; that’s not in our family. Just let him become as proficient as that with the cane, and it’ll be just as good as if he were crammed full of shit [i.e., book learning].” “We shall do our best to educate your son,” said the headmaster and called for the 30-year-old “little Jack” to enter.
“Good,” said the father, “but do make it fast since I am paying you good money, because I’m going over to the blacksmith to get a shoe put on my horse and then I want to pay you your good money and take him home again straight after that.” “Better you take him back right now,” said the principal, “because there is nothing I can do in that amount of time.” And so it was that the father took his little son by the hand and steered him back to mother.
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Vunder zeltsame kurtsveilige lustige geshikhte un daten der velt bekanten
shild burger
c.a 1700

Prepared by Ruth von Bernuth, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, US

2. Text

Source:

Amsterdam, no date
fol. 52r-v

185
ניקש קענט. יין וĽטצ נדפ אטנ. וĽ נו תיו נדפ. פראפיקר וĽד סרליפנשופ פפֿיר. סר איא דריויף יאלו אלאט.
יוונ דרפ פפֿיר. איאו וĽ נדפ. שיפראַך וĽד סרליפנשופ fri. חטפ נאך נדפ גילעפרג. וואט דעפ קויפל. קעמ.
עטפ פפֿיר. וואט חטפ אניר איו דרייפג וĽדעלטג. איא ביו נד פיפק. אנל עפֿצפג יאדו. אייר טאם אלט. אונ.
קון קענק ביט וĽ פֿיל. אליו דריופ ועערפֿר טאט. ואו דעפוזה לאדער. קעמ דעפ שפילנשופ. סר וĽדפ טע.
שũוּפער צו צוק:
ףאַל איאו דעייש דוו שופ לייטֿר. איר גטגננווי וואר. אונ לוע שפילנשופ איו גיפֿעה אונט. וĽ דעו
פראפֿיקעש אייו גונג מיט רוחן גיפֿיצפ גאמ. קעמ דעו. דיר. מיוו חוק. דערף אביכי נו וĽ זאָר גילעפרג. אונ ליישק.
יעסי צו וקען מים. רע דע פֿאַר וימל פשונ עאָל דע הוּדריוּן מאמ. וĽ הוּי טר שרוּן נד בו.
אלש ווקנ דע פֿל פריספ גהַּר. מיר וואלו אוּגון ביטש און איו חוק. קעמ דעפ שפילנשופ. לייסיט דארוך דש.
דריויף טיירניג יוגֿניאל גניק גניק. איו. דעוּפֿאַר פֿאַניָר איי כופֿ ít קאמיג קיט אימֿ מיאָפֿייר. אונ מיוו געַּעל.
איך וואלו אימ גענר ויידר מיט מיר אאיו געמוּג. איך וּל נוּר גימ חדך שמיד גניק. איי בישלאנטלי ליואו דער טאָר רייל.
איך איי וידר חולָל. איי. איי אייר גונ געלט דעַּג. ואו דע גימ ליבר. קעמ דעפ שפילנשופ אייזגנ וידר מיט
רי. דעו איך או קאָאָרבי ציצט. קון איי ביט מיט איי איו רספֿייר אליו טאמ. דעו פֿאַריזיו ייוו קון ליי ביצא דעַּג
אונט פֿריטֿ ניאו וידר לייר צו דער מוגט:

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Wonderful, strange, entertaining and highly comical stories and deeds of the world-famous people of Schildburg

How a man of Schildburg brought his son to school, and what happened there

Vunder seltsame kurtsveylige unt rekht lekherlikhe geshikhte unt daten der velt bekanten shild burger

1727

Translated by Ruth von Bernuth, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, US

Text 3

Vunder seltsame kurtsveylige unt rekht lekherlikhe geshikhte unt daten der velt bekanten shild burger. Amsterdam 1727.

fol. 56r-v

Chapter 42: How a man of Schildburg brought his thirty year-old son to the principal of a school for instruction, and what happened there.

A well-known man of Schildburg heard it said that one should not allow the youth of a child to slip by, but, rather, one should start training him early, just as one would a young sapling. So he led his young son by the hand into town, spent 18 pennies on buying him first a pair of shoes, and then brought him straight to the principal of the school to give him a proper education. The principal asked: “Doesn't he know anything?” “No,” said the father. “How old is he?” asked the principal next. “He’s only thirty,” replied the father. “What a boor,” said the principal, “if he hasn’t learnt anything yet.” “What could one possibly learn in just 30 years?” said the father. “I am now 74 and what I know isn’t worth a shit.” “It is not going to be easy for him to learn anything now,” said the principal. At this point, someone opened the door to the classroom and
the Schildburger caught a glimpse of one of the boys getting birched by a teacher. “Well,” he said, “there is no need for this son of mine to become a serious scholar, because there are no scholars in our family. Just let him become as proficient as that with the cane, and it’ll be just as good as if he were crammed full of shit [i.e., book learning].” “We shall do our best to educate your son,” said the headmaster and called for the 30-year-old “little Jack” to enter. “Good,” said the father, “but do make it fast since I am paying you good money because I’m going over to the blacksmith to get a shoe put on my horse and then I want to pay you your good money and take him home again straight after that.” “Take him back right now,” said the principal, “because there is nothing I can do in that amount of time.” And so it was that the father took his little son by the hand and steered him home to his property, proclaiming, “Now my son is full of understanding.”

fol. 62r

Epilogue

Give this a try!

This book, which I have translated word-by-word from Christian [lit., priestly, i.e., Roman-character] German into Yiddish, I encourage you—old and young, and every one else too—to hurry up and buy, because you will find much pleasure within.

You will find this book funny and enjoyable.

It will lift your spirits.

Gather round quickly.

Take a quick look and snap it up fast.

I won’t be staying around any too long.

It is time to move on and take it here, there and everywhere.

I have no choice or some other bookseller will beat me to it.

And I have spent so much time on it.

Dear people, please keep that in mind.

How else can I pay my way?

Now I have to go about selling it as hard as I can.

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3. Text

Source:

Vunder seltsame kurtsveylige unt rekht lekerlikhe geshikhte unt daten der velt bekanten shild burger

1727

Prepared by Ruth von Bernuth, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, US

Amsterdam 1727

fol. 56r-v

Daw Gwoyis Aon' Frachtsnesh Kapitl

Wi ai Shilbotzker dyi un Pon Droizig jar Aler Aon' di she' ol' Aon' di unim miinstzer firtz Aon' zo lurfnik aon' oswet da.

Psakten Aon' 

Ai'n olsol bynatzer Shilbotzker dos haen Aon' aom. Do mas di'a oswetlnynta unt Firdz olsol vono olsol friltscher aon' di'.

Yinbn bizh Yins Aon' ommen furtz aon'.
הсталבannuals_daysınız כנין ויבי דער תאגא אוונא. פֿורטאו איז איז די שטאָט. קורֿפֿן איז צו פֿאָס איז פֿאָר שוא. האָג' ברֿאנֿטִן איז זוכן. בֿאָס פֿאר פֿיינֿשֶּר. אוֹן בֿי דער פֿארֿנֿט פֿאָס. דער שֶּלייזִיטשֶׁר פֿאָס. האָג' רע דאָג צחן. קֿינָר גהָאִיג דער פֿאָס. אאנֿגֿאָן דער שֶּלייזִיטשֶּר איז אָלְּט אוֹן דעָּן. אָאנֿגֿאָן אָך דער בעָּוָּן אָן דאָג דאָג צחן.

אָיז טאָסַרִינָן דאָג אַלְּט. שֶפּאָרֿאָה דער שֶּלייזִיטשֶּר אָיז אָיז קיָּפִּיין. דאָג איַנֿוֹן אָפּוּס דאָג אוֹן. אַנֿוֹן איַנֿוֹן אָלָג צו. אַנֿוֹן איַנֿוֹן אָלָג אָלָג צו. אַנֿוֹן איַנֿוֹן אָלָג אָלָג צו. אַנֿוֹן איַנֿוֹן אָלָג אָלָג צו. אַנֿוֹן איַנֿוֹן אָלָג אָלָג צו. אַנֿוֹן איַנֿוֹן אָלָג אָלָג צו.

שֶוּרֵות אָג צחן.
ליבי פלט או ייק טו טו והול בידאכט:

וגו געל איק טו אנדרש קנטיק בישטי.

וגו אפרטנדר מוה איך נג גלייסを得 מיט ארומ נון:

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