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## **The Dangers of Being without a Frame (*Con licenza de Superiori*): Some Remarks on a Mischievous Old Yiddish Book**

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**Abstract:** *Kü-bukh*, the “Book of Cows,” is one of the masterpieces of Old Yiddish literature. Printed in Verona in 1595, it is a collection of fables in rhymed prose, without any frame-story. The book was attacked as “not-godly” in the introduction to the *Mayse-bukh* (Basel 1602), and perhaps rightly so. In this paper I wish to suggest that the *Kü-bukh* is a distinctly playful, mischievous work, in some cases simply because it includes rewritings of Hebrew fables which originally appeared in works structured by an authorial frame-story, such as Isaac ibn Sahula’s *Meshal haqadmoni* (“Fables from the Distant Past,” thirteenth century); removed from its former context, the *muser-haskel* (moral) appears in two cases the very opposite of what it could be expected: a wise *talmid-khokhem* is presented as a *shlimazl*, a man betrayed by his beautiful wife is ridiculed for being too pious. On the map of early modern Yiddish literature, the *Kü-bukh* seems the product of Jewish culture in Italy before the Council of Trent, before censorship prevailed not only on Hebrew books, but on the *Decameron* and other “pleasant readings” as well.

While preparing the critical edition of *Bovo d’Antona* (printed in Isny in 1541), one of the best-known Old Yiddish chivalric poems, I found myself presenting the book as a “naughty” work in contrast to the “good” and “pious” *muser-bikher*, such as the morally and halachically didactic *Lev tov* and *Brantshpigl*, or the books of precepts and *minhogim* (customs).<sup>1</sup> *Bovo d’Antona* was indeed composed with a view to

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<sup>1</sup> A number of points in this paper appeared in Claudia Rosenzweig, “La ricezione del *Meshal HaQadmoni* nella letteratura yiddish antica,” in Yitzhaq ibn Sahula, *Favole antiche*, ed. Anna Linda Callow and Pier Francesco Fumagalli, 2 vols. (Milano: G.A.M. Rudiano, Brescia – Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 2021), vol. II, 49–63. I wish to thank Guy Ron-Gilboa, Kedem Golden, David Rotman, Ron Lasri and Alberto Conte for their suggestions, and Jennie Feldman for the editing of the English text.

giving pleasure,<sup>2</sup> and it includes scenes of carnal love. The author is the polymath Eliyahu ben Asher haLevi Ashkenazi. Known also as Elia Levita or Elye Bokher, he wrote a number of works in Hebrew and in Yiddish that enjoyed a wide readership and had several reprints. His surviving Yiddish works include *Ha-Mavdil-lid* (“Poem of He Who divides the sacred from the profane”), a gross parody of a Hebrew *piyut*. Probably composed in 1514, the poem is characterized by an interplay of high and low registers and contains a number of sexual vulgarities. It is kept in two manuscripts, one of which includes religious instructions and translations of the Five Scrolls; it was copied in Venice for Serlina, a young bride, in the middle of the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup> If such a poem appeared in the same manuscript as religious texts, one may infer that the reading canon was rich and comprehensive, encompassing literary genres such as vulgarizations of the Pentateuch and other books of the Bible, as well as prayers, letters, and stories, together with obscene poems. Indeed, there is a broad range of reading matter to be found in what is arguably the most important “book of stories” in Old Yiddish: the *Mayse-bukh*. Printed in Basel in 1602, this work includes rewritings of Talmudic *haggadot* and hagiographic tales about *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, together with long stories intended solely for pleasure, with no moral and, at least in one case, with frank sex scenes.<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that in their several reprintings in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, *Bovo d’Antona* and the *Mayse-bukh* always retained the parts involving sex, which indicates that they were integral rather than marginal to these Old Yiddish literary works, and that printers were confident of selling their editions to prospective readers. Clearly there was a public demand for engaging reading matter that offered a mix of ethical teaching and humor, religious customs and social satire, examples of pious conduct and portraits of Jewish and non-Jewish everyday life.

Many of these elements are distinctively present in the *Kü-bukh*, the “Book of Cows,” a collection of fables in rhymed prose. Printed in Verona in 1595, the *Kü-bukh*—one of the most interesting works of Old Yiddish literature—is the focus of this paper. In its day it must have enjoyed a marked popularity, since in the introduction to the *Mayse-bukh*, the Old Yiddish “Book of Stories” mentioned above, we find this stern injunction:

do not read from the “Book of Cows” (*Kü-bukh*) and you should also not make the effort to read from *Ditrikh fun Bern* and *Mainster Hildebrant*, since they are worth mere vapor, they give neither warmth nor heat, and besides, they are not “godly,” and you well deserve that God will forgive you: in our books it is written that it is a sin as big as a house to read from them on the holy Shabbat.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Bovo d’Antona* was dedicated to women who asked the writer to publish the enjoyable work “so that they might amuse themselves with it and read it on Shabbat and the Holidays.” Elye Bokher, *Bovo d’Antona* (Isny, 1541), Introduction, ll. 1–10. See also Claudia Rosenzweig, *Bovo d’Antona by Elye Bokher. A Yiddish Romance. A Critical Edition with Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 58–64.

<sup>3</sup> See Claudia Rosenzweig, “Rhymes to Sing and Rhymes to Hang up. Some Remarks on a Lampoon in Yiddish by Elye Bokher (Venice 1514),” in *The Italia Judaica Jubilee Conference*, eds. Shlomo Simonsohn and Joseph Shatzmiller (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 143–165 and the bibliography quoted there.

<sup>4</sup> I presented part of this argument in my “*Getlekhe un nisht getlekhe mayses*. The *Mayse-bukh* and its Readership,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2019): 203–223.

<sup>5</sup> The *editio princeps* of the *Mayse-bukh* can be consulted here:

[https://www.e-rara.ch/bau\\_1/content/titleinfo/10299059](https://www.e-rara.ch/bau_1/content/titleinfo/10299059). See also Astrid Starck, *Un beau livre*

*Ditrikh fun Bern* and *Meinster Hildebrant*, the two works to be shunned along with the *Kü-bukh*, are Yiddish rewritings of German chivalric works. They are defined as “not-godly” literature, which it is a grave sin to read on the holy Sabbath,<sup>6</sup> the day of the week dedicated to reading.<sup>7</sup> In other contemporary Yiddish sources, too, chivalric literature is considered “dangerous” reading material, being conducive to sin.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the topos that reading romances can be dangerous on account of “their capacity to stir mimetically the passions”<sup>9</sup> can likewise be found in other European literatures of the time. Best known is Dante Alighieri’s story of Paolo and Francesca (*Inferno*, *canto* V, ll. 73–142), in which their reading *per diletto* (“for pleasure”) about Guinevere and Lancelot’s illicit passion awakens them to their own desire for each other, and will lead to their deaths at the hand of Francesca’s husband. The romance, and its author, are to blame. Three centuries later, Don Quixote loses his mind as a result of reading multiple chivalric romances. It could be understood that the two Yiddish chivalric works cited here are to be avoided because they are clearly based on non-Jewish sources, or perhaps because they were intended “for pleasure”: in the Yiddish version of *Ditrikh fun Bern*, for example, printed in Krakow in 1597, it

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*d’histoire. Eyn shön Mayse bukh*, Fac-similé de l’*editio princeps* de Bâle (1602), trans. and ed. Astrid Starck, 2 vols. (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2004) and in particular 4–5 for the quoted passage from the introduction.

<sup>6</sup> In the introduction to the *Mayse-bukh* the reference is probably to the section in the *Shulhan Arukh* regarding what is forbidden and what is allowed to be read on Shabbat (*Orah hayim* 307:16). *Sifre’ milhamot*—“books of wars” or “books of battles,” which could well refer to chivalric works—are forbidden, but Rabbi Moshe Isserles permitted them if they were in the Holy Tongue, i.e., Hebrew.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance c. 3v of ms. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Hébreu 92

([https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10539964r.r=92\\_92?rk=128756;0](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10539964r.r=92_92?rk=128756;0)), where the dedication says:

איך וויל אויך דו אירן איר ורויאן . אם שבת זולט איר דש בוך אל שויאן . אין דער וואכן גען אוי שפיגן / און געלט גרויגן .  
(here I want to honor you women / on Shabbat you should look at the book / during the week [you should] spin / and earn money).

<sup>8</sup> The reading of *torekhte* or *narishe bikher* (foolish books) and *sifrey havolim* (books of vanity) is condemned a number of times. See, for example, Max Weinreich, *Bilder fun der yidisher literaturgeshikhte fun di onheybn biz Mendele Moykher-Sforim* (Vilne: Farlag Tomor fun Yosef Kamermakher, 1928), 53–55 and Weinreich, *Geshikhte fun der yidisher shprakh. Bagrifn, faktn, metodn*, 4 vols. (New York: YIVO, 1973), and in particular vol. I, 270, 277, 279 and vol. IV, 285–286 (English version: Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, ed. Paul Glasser, trans. Shlomo Noble with the assistance of Joshua A. Fishman, 2 vols., YIVO Institute for Jewish Research [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008], Vol. I, 265, 272, 274, A261). See also Rosenzweig, *Bovo d’Antona*, 58–64 (quoted above: see footnote 2) and the bibliography quoted there.

The ban is given forthright expression in the Judeo-Italian version of Slonik’s *Mitsves noshim* kept in ms. München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (BSB), Cod. Hebr. 475, c. 3v (copied in 1596), where it is stated: “And he who reads Ariosto, the *Innamoramento*, the *Cento novelle*, *Amadis di Gaula* and similar profane books will act very badly: it is not permitted to read them on the Shabbat as *rabbenu Moshe* [Moses our teacher] says, while talking about these books, that those who composed them and those who printed them and those who read them, especially on Shabbat, should deserve to be thrown all together in the fire, together with their books, since from them one cannot learn anything but maliciousness and vain things and a lascivious life, which leads everybody to *Gehinnom* (Hell).” See Claudia Rosenzweig, “Women: Instructions for Use. Slonik’s *Seder mitzvot nashim* from Yiddish to Judeo-Italian,” in *Rabbinical Literature in Yiddish and Judezmo*, eds. Katja Šmid and David M. Bunis (forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> See Michael Schoenfeldt, “Reading Bodies,” in *Reading, Society and Politics in Early Modern England*, eds. Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 215–243, and in particular 217.

is stated in the paratexts – on the front-page and in the colophon – that the book is *kurtsvaylik* (“entertaining”); no moral justification is proposed.<sup>10</sup>

Why, though, is the *Kü-bukh* included in the list of books to be shunned? One can only speculate. Was the disapproving editor of the *Mayse-bukh* seeking to highlight the worth of his own book at the expense of rival works? Perhaps he wanted to offer his “godly” book as a counter-work to the *Kü-bukh*, even though three of the stories in the *Mayse-bukh* also appear, albeit in rhymed prose, in the *Kü-bukh*, and the *Mayse-bukh* has “not-godly” stories of its own.<sup>11</sup> Or was it because the morals were too universal? According to Eli Katz, the *Kü-bukh* was attacked on account of the work’s blunt and salacious sexual allusions, which were toned down in the 1697 reprint of Frankfurt am Main.<sup>12</sup> There is more to be said on this, but before pursuing the discussion, a few remarks about this famed work are in order.

The *Kü-bukh* was published in Verona in 1595 in the printing house of Francesco delle Donne by Avraham ben Mattathia Bat-Sheva.<sup>13</sup> It includes thirty-five fables, accompanied by illustrations, but with no frame-story.<sup>14</sup> The main sources for the first part of the book are Berekhya HaNakdan’s *Mishle shu’alim* (“Fox Fables,” thirteenth century) and *Edelstein* by the German Dominican Ulrich Boner

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<sup>10</sup> The term *kurtsvaylik* is quite commonly found in Yiddish paratexts, including in chivalric poems based on the Bible. In the latter, however, the opening stanzas state that the work will instruct readers on God’s wonders and strengthen their faith in Him; since these Yiddish poems are based not only on the Bible but also on rabbinic commentaries and *midrashim*, it is understood that Jewish readers, in addition to being entertained, will gain instruction. See, for example, stanza 4 in the *Sefer Shmuel* (Augsburg 1544): דער וועל . ווי גוט יתברך דורך זייניא גויטיא גרוש וואונדר הוט גיטון . (‘I want to tell about the Book of Samuel as well, [about] how God Blessed Be He made his good great wonders / He will not abandon us in any state of misery in our exile’).

<sup>11</sup> I endeavored to show this aspect of the *Mayse-bukh* in “*Getlekhe un nisht getlekhe mayses*” (see above, footnote 4).

<sup>12</sup> See *Book of Fables. The Yiddish Collection of Reb Moshe Wallich. Frankfurt am Main, 1697*, trans. and ed. Eli Katz (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 20–22.

<sup>13</sup> There is one extant copy of the book, in a private collection in London. See Khone Shmeruk, “Defuse’ Yiddish be-Italia,” *Italia* III, 1–2 (1982), 112–175 [in Hebrew]; Moshe N. Rosenfeld, *The Book of Cows. A Facsimile Edition of the Famed Kuhbuch* (London: Hebraica Books, 1984); No. 70, in Chava Turniansky and Erika Timm, *Yiddish in Italia*, with the collaboration of Claudia Rosenzweig (Milan: Associazione Italiana degli Amici dell’Università di Gerusalemme, 2003), 138–141. The book can be viewed on the following site: <https://www.hebrewbooks.org/45950>. Studies of the book include, for example: Eli Katz, “Das >Kuhbukh< und das >Sefer Mešolim<. Die Überlieferung eines Mitteljiddischen Textes,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 112 (1990), 81–95; Jennifer Juillard-Maniece, “‘Ainer sol sich al-mol bedenken wer er sei’: Social Order, Status, and Class Stratification in the *Kuh-bukh*,” in *Worlds of Old Yiddish Literature*, eds. Simon Neuberg and Diana Matut (Cambridge: Legenda, 2024), 159–173; Simon Neuberg, “The *Kü’-bukh*: In Search of Origins,” in *Worlds of Old Yiddish Literature*, 79–92; and Simon Neuberg, “Neues zum *Kü’-buch*,” *Jiddistik Mitteilungen* 70 (November 2023), 15–21. Other seminal studies of the genre of the fable in Old Yiddish are: Erika Timm, “Die ‘Fabel vom alten Löwen’ in jiddistischer und komparatistischer Sicht,” *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 100 (1981), 109–170 and Erika Timm, “Zur jiddischen Fabelliteratur des 16. Jahrhunderts,” *Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division C, Talmud and Midrash, Philosophy and Mysticism, Hebrew and Yiddish Literature (1982), 159–164.

<sup>14</sup> See Khone Shmeruk, *The Illustrations in Yiddish Books of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. The Texts, the Pictures and Their Audience* (Jerusalem: Akademon, 1986), pp. 30–33 [in Hebrew]; Diane Wolfthal, *Picturing Yiddish. Gender, Identity, and Memory in the Illustrated Yiddish Books of Renaissance Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), esp. figures 105a–120b.

(fourteenth century),<sup>15</sup> and for the second part, Isaac ibn Sahula's *Meshal haqadmoni* ("Fables from the Distant Past," thirteenth century). These sources are very different from each other: while the Hebrew *Mishle shu'alim* and the German *Edelstein* are closer to the Aesopian fable tradition,<sup>16</sup> in Ibn Sahula's Hebrew work *Meshal haqadmoni* the fables are inserted into a complex structure and held together by a frame-story with a strong didactic and moral purpose, in a manner resembling works in the Arabic genre of the *maqama*.<sup>17</sup> Composed in 1281, *Meshal haqadmoni* was printed by Gershom Soncino in Brescia around 1491, reprinted by Soncino around 1497, and in Venice in 1546;<sup>18</sup> there followed a number of further printings and also Yiddish reworkings.<sup>19</sup> A reprint of *Kü-bukh* in Frankfurt am Main in 1697 was given the title *Sefer mesholim*.<sup>20</sup>

Of the 35 fables of the *Kü-bukh* eight are reworkings of *Meshal haqadmoni* that appear in the final part of the book and are much longer than the other fables in the collection.<sup>21</sup> They are:<sup>22</sup>

- n. XXVI, "The Peasant and the Scribe," 34v–38r (see *Meshal haqadmoni*, section III, ll. 18–209)
- n. XXVII, "The Mouse and the Weasel" (see *Meshal haqadmoni*, section III, ll. 266–612)
- n. XXVIII, "The Dog and the Cow" (see *Meshal haqadmoni*, section I, ll. 825–1042)
- n. XXIX, "The False Guardian" (see *Meshal haqadmoni*, section IV, ll.

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<sup>15</sup> On Boner and his work, see Klaus Grubmüller, *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters Verfasserlexicon*, ed. Kurt Ruh, with Gundolf Keil, Werner Schröder, Burghart Wachinger, Franz Josef Worstbrock, second edition (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1978–2004), s.v., vol. 1, cols. 947–952. The work appeared in print in 1461: see Doris Fouquet, *Der Edelstein. Faksimile der ersten Druckausgabe Bamberg 1461*, 16. I Eth. 2° der Herzog-August-Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel (Stuttgart: Müller and Schindler, 1972).

<sup>16</sup> For this tradition in Hebrew literature during the Renaissance, see David Rotman, "Author and Fiction, Lamb and Wolf: Hebrew Adaptations of 'Aesop's' Fables from the Middle Ages through the Early Modern Era," *Te'uda XXVIII* (2017), *Essays in Folklore and Jewish Studies in Honor of Professor Eli Yassif*, eds. Tova Rosen, Nili Aryeh-Sapir, David Rotman, Tsafi Sebban-Elran, pp. 495–537 [in Hebrew], and the rich bibliography quoted there.

<sup>17</sup> See Jefim Schirmann, *The History of Hebrew Poetry in Christian Spain and Southern France*, ed. Ezra Fleischer (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), 345–364 [in Hebrew].

<sup>18</sup> The first print can be viewed via this link:

[https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL\\_ALEPH990020220280205171/NLI](https://www.nli.org.il/he/books/NNL_ALEPH990020220280205171/NLI). For the second print, see Moses Marx, "Gershom Soncino. Contributions to the History of His Life and His Printing" in *Sepher ha-Yovel. A Tribute to Professor Alexander Marx*, ed. David Frankel (New York, 1943), i-x. For the rich manuscript tradition, see esp. Simona Gronemann, *The Story of Meshal haqadmoni and its Extant Copies in 15<sup>th</sup> Century Ashkenaz* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> See esp. Avraham Meir Habermann, "Di yidishe oysgabes fun 'Meshal hakadmoni,'" *YIVO-bleter* 13 (1938): 95–101. A complete analysis of the Yiddish rewritings of the *Meshal haqadmoni* remains a desideratum.

<sup>20</sup> See Katz, *Book of Fables*. Katz relates that only two copies of this print have survived, in Oxford and in Amsterdam (23, note 1). On the main differences between *Kü-bukh* and *Sefer mesholim*, see Katz's introduction, 19–22. On *Sefer mesholim*, cf. also Jeremy Dauber, *In the Demon's Bedroom: Yiddish Literature and the Early Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 87–139.

<sup>21</sup> I use as a main reference the following edition: Isaac ibn Sahula, *Meshal Haqadmoni. Fables from the Distant Past*, ed. and trans. Raphael Loewe, 2 vols. (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> For the titles given to the fables I have followed Eli Katz's edition of the reprint of the *Kü-bukh* published in Frankfurt am Main: *Book of Fables. The Yiddish Collection of Reb Moshe Wallich. Frankfurt am Main, 1697*, trans. and ed. Eli Katz (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), see especially page 12.

- 1093–1245)  
n. XXX, “The Adulterous Young Wife,” 48r–54v (see *Meshal haqadmoni*, section II, ll. 132–435)  
n. XXXI, “The Greedy Innkeeper” (see *Meshal haqadmoni*, section III, ll. 415–612)  
n. XXXII, “The Rich Man and the Beggar” (see *Meshal haqadmoni*, section III, ll. 815–857)  
n. XXXIII, “The Lazy and the Diligent Servant” (see *Meshal haqadmoni*, section II, ll. 1205–1288)

Unlike *Mishle Shu'alim* and *Edelstein*, where the fables have no frame-story and so can be more freely adapted, in *Meshal haqadmoni* the fables are embedded in the main discussions between the מקשה (Cynic) and the מחבר (Moralist, lit. “author”) on the central topics of the work’s five parts: wisdom, penitence, sound counsel, humility, and reverence. Each part has a twofold construction: the thesis put forward by the Cynic, “a challenger” or devil’s advocate, who tells a long and complex story with a “perverted moral,”<sup>23</sup> and the response given by the Moralist.<sup>24</sup>

In this paper I wish to suggest that some of the fables in the *Kü-bukh* are particularly “dangerous” simply because they appear without the frame that in Ibn Sahula’s work has a key authorial function, firmly directing the reader’s reception of the text.<sup>25</sup> This is especially true in the case of two fables which, in *Meshal haqadmoni*, are narrated by the Cynic and are thus intended to serve as examples of negative behavior, to be duly countered by the Moralist; in the *Kü-bukh*, however, there is no such corrective, counter-balancing text. The two stories in question are “The Peasant and the Scribe” and “The Adulterous Young Wife.” In presenting them, I shall first consider the versions in the *Kü-bukh*, noting the Hebrew source, and then compare them with the Yiddish version of *Meshal haqadmoni*, printed in Frankfurt an der Oder in 1693.

“The Peasant and the Scribe” is a fable about a coarse, simple man (*a grober poyer*) who lives on the far side of the Stura river (Stura di Demonte)<sup>26</sup> in today’s Piedmont, and a scribe (*shrayber*) dedicated to wisdom who is travelling in search of work as a *melamed*, a teacher. When the scribe sees that the peasant has loaded his donkey only on one side, and in order to balance the weight has added pebbles on the other side, he offers practical advice on how to adjust the load:

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<sup>23</sup> Dan Pagis, “Variety in Medieval Rhymed Narratives,” *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 27 (1978), 79–98, in particular 94.

<sup>24</sup> The structure of the work can be seen in Raphael Loewe, “Introduction,” in Isaac ibn Sahula, *Meshal Haqadmoni*, xxiv–xxvii.

<sup>25</sup> On the frame and its functions see, among others, Mieke Bal, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Fourth Edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 51–58; Alberto Varvaro, “Forme di intertestualità. La narrativa spagnola medievale tra Oriente e Occidente,” *Annali dell’Istituto Orientale di Napoli* (sezione romanza) XXVII, no. 1 (1985): 49–65; Michelangelo Picone, “Tre tipi di cornice novellistica: modelli orientali e tradizione narrativa medievale,” *Filologia e critica* XIII (1988): 3–26; John Pier, “Narrative Levels (revised version; uploaded 23 April 2014),” in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, eds. Peter Hühn et al. (Hamburg: Hamburg University, 2014). <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narrative-levels-revised-version-uploaded-23-april-2014>. Pier’s work has a rich bibliography.

<sup>26</sup> See Katz, *Book of Fables*, 290.

זאלהיר איז דער פויאר האט זיין איזל בייא דעם צייים. אונ' דער שרייבר אים אנטגיגן קאם: Here is the peasant leading the donkey by its halter, and the scribe is approaching him<sup>27</sup>



**Figure 1:** *Kü-bukh*, 35r–v

אלהיא איז גיפאלן דער איזל נידר. אונ' דער פויאר אונ' דער שרייבר העלפן אין אויף ווידר Here is the donkey that has fallen, and the peasant and the scribe are helping it up again<sup>28</sup>



**Figure 2:** *Kü-bukh*, 36r–v

The text highlights the Scribe's belief that he is "clever and wise," and he boasts about his talents as a teacher. The Peasant, however, rejects such help because he cannot trust a person who is poor, and it is thanks to his refusal that he finally acquires a lot of money. The moral is twofold: first, that the Scribe, or *melamed*, should content himself with his work; second, that since he is poor, he "can't give others good advice":

ווען צו זיינעם רוט מאג זיך נימנט גלויק צו שלאגן. אז דיזם פויאר אלהיא דעש שטיין טראגן. קאם צו נויץ אונ' צו גוט. דרום ער גינג נוך זיינם מוטא. אונ' דער שרייבר האלבן דער פויאר וואלט ניט פאלגן זיין רוט. העט ערז גיטון זא ווער ער גילעגן אין קוט. דז ער דיא טויזינט פפונט העט פויר לארן. דרום זאל אים איינר ניט לאשן גין ריד פויר ארן. דען רוט פון איין מאן דר ניט גלויק האט. ווען גר זעלטן עז איינם גירוט. אונ' מאן זאל רוט פרויגן איין גלויק האפטגן מאן. אונ' איין

For no good fortune will adhere to his advice. Just as this peasant's transporting of the stones turned out to be useful when he followed his own inclination and refused to follow the scribe's advice. Had he done so, he would have found himself lying in the mire. For he would have lost the thousand pounds. So no one should open his ears to the advice of a man who

<sup>27</sup> See Katz, *Book of Fables*, 148–149. Here and in the example below פויאר is my emendation: the print has פויאר.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Katz, *Book of Fables*, 152–153.

מענשן . זא ווערט אין גוט דורך אין בענשן . אונ' וואז ערר אן  
היבט דז וועררט אים פויר זיך גין . וויא וואל ער זוישט ניט  
מויכט בישטין . דוך אויבר טראגט אל מול דאז גלויק . צו  
מענכם גוטם שטויק . דז דא שון איז ווידר דיא [נאט] יאר . אז  
דא גישאך אלהיא דיזם פויאר . דאז ער ניט וואלט פון דען און  
גלויק האפט'יגן רוט ביגערן . פון איינע דעם דא לויפט דער  
שטערן . אונ' ווען זיין צייט איז דאז ער גלויק האט צו זיין זאכן  
אין דענן זעלבן גיזעלשפט זול זיך איינר מאכן . לייכט ווערט  
ער אך גנישן גלויק איין טאל . אונ' גוט מערט אים געבן גלויק  
אונ' הייל . סליק

has no luck, for it rarely succeeds. But he should seek advice from a fortunate person and God will bless him through it. For good luck always prevails even in matters that seem to go against nature, just as happened with this peasant when he refused advice from the unlucky man. That is why things turned out well for him. Therefore one should seek advice from someone for whom the stars are favorable and in a period when things are going fortunately for him. And one should place oneself in the company of such people. Then he will easily enjoy a large measure of fortune and God will give him happiness and prosperity. The end.<sup>29</sup>

The fable that served as a source (see *Meshal haqadmoni*, section III, ll. 18–209) is told by the Cynic at the beginning of part III (“On Sound Counsel”), and takes place in Turkey. There, the scribe gives the bumpkin a lesson on Neoplatonic metaphysics. In his contrarian moral, the Cynic states that one should “distrust glib advice,”<sup>30</sup> but of course for the true moral of the fable (the “sound counsel” of the section’s title) the reader is meant to turn to the Moralists’ response in this section, which also contains other fables that later feature in the *Kü-bukh* (XXVII, XXXI, XXXII). However, since there is no frame story in the *Kü-bukh*, there is no correlation with such rectifying fables, and the story of the Peasant, with its unsettling moral, remains unchallenged.

In this instance, the *Kü-bukh* moves very far from its source and presents a crude vision of life, based on the importance of luck and money. The scribe/teacher/*talmid khokhem* is an object of mockery, a beggar who talks too much, who is too sure of his wisdom and surprised at the stupidity of the Peasant—the one who in the end enjoys the blessings of the stars and of the fickle goddess *Fortuna*.<sup>31</sup> This conclusion is all the more surprising when one takes into account that Ibn Sahula was emphatically opposed to any belief in astrology; this opposition is one of his principal themes in the fifth section of *Meshal haqadmoni*.<sup>32</sup>

In the Yiddish version of *Meshal haqadmoni* of 1693 (63v–68r), the story stays close to the source: the reader is made well aware that they are reading something told by the *makshe* (the Yiddish keeps the Hebrew term for the Cynic), an effect that is

<sup>29</sup> This English translation is taken from Katz’s edition, 156, with some changes.

<sup>30</sup> See Loewe, “Introduction,” xl.

<sup>31</sup> The text has the term *glük*, derived from the German component of the Yiddish, instead of *mazl* or *goyrl*, from the Hebrew component. Could *glük* be a reference to the pagan goddess *Fortuna*? It may be of interest to read this story in the context of the Italian Renaissance concept of *Fortuna*. On this subject there is a rich bibliography. See esp. the seminal work by Howard R. Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna in Mediaeval Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927). *Fortuna* plays an important role in the genre of *novellae* (see, among others, Amedeo Quondam, “Le cose (e le parole) del mondo,” in Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, eds. Amedeo Quondam, Maurizio Fiorilla and Giancarlo Alfano (Milan: BUR, 2013), 1669–1815, esp. 1737, 1747–1749 and 1759); in chivalric literature (see, among others, Stefano Jossa, “Ironia,” in *Lessico critico dell’Orlando Furioso*, ed. Annalisa Izzo (Rome: Carocci, 2016), 177–197, esp. 191–192 on “ironia della sorte,” irony of fate); and, of course, in political and historiographical discourse, as in Machiavelli’s *Principe*.

<sup>32</sup> See Schirmann and Fleischer, *The History of Hebrew Poetry in Christian Spain and Southern France*, 357–358 and esp. footnote 107; Loewe, ‘Introduction’, xlvi–xlix.

enhanced graphically by having the words in Hebrew and in square print, an eye-catching device very common in Yiddish translations of Hebrew texts.



**Figure 3:** *Meshal haqadmoni*, Frankfurt an der Oder, 1693, 63v (Jerusalem, NLI, 91 A 514)

Moreover, as in the source, the story takes place in Turkey, that is—for the seventeenth-century printer and reader—in the Ottoman Empire. This is the moral:

ונשאתי דא שפראך דר (מקשה צום מחבר) האשטו גיהערט וויא איך מיט דיין משל האב באווערט. דש מן ניט זאל פאלגן צו דר עצה פון איין קלוגן מאן. דען עש איז נור נרהייט אונ' איז ניקש דראן : אונ' דרום זאל דיא חכמה אונ' עצה זיין פֿר אכט אונ' אל דיא קלוגהייט האב איך ניקש גימאכט :

**and I said** the Cynic (*der makshe*) told the Moralist (*mekhaber*): “Did you hear how I proved that one should not follow the counsel of a wise man? Because it is only foolishness and there is nothing inside. Therefore one should be careful with wisdom and wise counsel and I did not make anything wise.”

In this version the Cynic is challenged and does not have the story's last word, as happens in the *Kü-bukh*. The moral he espouses will be, in what follows the passage quoted above, challenged by the Moralist.

The second of the two *Kü-bukh* fables under discussion here, the tale of "The Adulterous Young Wife," takes place in England.

אלהיא ליגן זי נון אלי באד . אר און ברוך אונ' זיא און קלייד :  
זיא האטן איין גרושי פרייד: גאט געב אין דו הערץ לייד : סליק  
Here the two of them are lying together, he  
without trousers and she without clothes;  
they had great joy. God give them  
heartache. End.<sup>33</sup>



**Figure 4:** *Kü-bukh*, 48r–v

Rich in idioms and humor, it is one of the longest and most vivid of the fables in the *Kü-bukh*. It tells of a beautiful young woman, married to a very pious Jew, who seeks a handsome young lover. In the end she escapes with the lover, taking all the husband's possessions. The moral is as follows:

אלהיא איז דער מאן מיט דען הוירנר גרוש : זיין קלייג איז און  
ציל אונ' און מוש :  
Here is the man with his big horns.<sup>34</sup> His  
lamentation is boundless and  
immeasurable<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> The censored version of the book, *Sefer mesholim*, has a shorter caption, with no mention of sexual joy: "Here the two of them are lying together, God give them heartache." See Katz, *Book of Fables*, 196–197.

<sup>34</sup> The image of cuckold's horns on a man who has been betrayed by his wife and is thus an object of scorn and contempt, is rooted in Italian culture and in Mediterranean culture generally. Interestingly, the detail does not appear in the text of *Meshal haqadmoni*, but does figure in the illustrations of this episode in the *editio princeps* (Brescia, 1490 cca) and in some of the subsequent prints (in the Venice print, 18v, the pious man points to his horns). Cf. Sara Offenber, "On a Pious Man, Adulterous Wife, and the Pleasure of Preaching to Others in Yitshaq Ibn Sahula's *Meshal ha-Qadmoni*," *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 12 (2016): 103–125, in particular 121–122.

<sup>35</sup> See Katz, *Book of Fables*, 216–217.



Figure 5: Kü-bukh, 54v

דאז בייא שפיל איך אויך נון וויל טון ווישן . אויף צווייא  
ארלייא זך גפלישן . צו הנטש פֿון ערשטן אן . וויא די ורויא זאל  
האלטן ערליך אירן מאן . אונ' זול שטעץ צו זיינם דינשט זיין  
בירייט . אז אלהיא דער אלט מאן זיינם ווייב האט פֿור גיזייט .  
אונ' דא אן זול איטליכי ורומי ורויא גידענקן . פֿון דעם גוטן  
וועג נוימר צו ווענקן . אונ' דא צו איז נוך מין פֿון דין בייא שפיל  
גיהוירט . דז איין איטליכר מאן זאל זיין ניט אז גנץ ור שטורט .  
צו גין גלייך אז איין טומש ויך . אונ' ניט צו פֿרויבן אונ' מערקן  
פֿויר זיך . אויף אל דאז עז אים טוט נוט . אונ' ניט צו גין גלייך  
אז ווער ער טוט . צו ויל אין דען קוישטליכן אורדן טרעטן .  
אונ' נוימר אנדרש טון אז צו בעטן . אונ' צו מול נישט אין זיינם  
הויז אויף זו זעהן . דעם מויכט נון וואל אך אז דיזם אלטן  
גישעהן . דרום דז ער גינג אין דער איין ועלטיקייד גר זער . דא  
פֿון ווארד אים נון זיין הויז גר לער . אזו גישכט איין איטליכן  
דער זיך צו איין פֿעלטיג מאכט . אונ' אויף קיינר לייא זאך גיבט  
ער קיין אכט . אונ' ניט וויל מערקן אויף זיינש ווייב גישעפֿט .  
אונ' ניט ביהאלט דאז מעשיר בייא דער העפֿט . אונ' זיינם ווייב  
וויל צו פֿיל גיטרויאן . דא מאג אים צום לעשטן זיכר וואל  
גירואן . אונ' אייך איינר דער זיך צו פֿיל וויל פֿרום מאכן . אונ'  
ניט אום גיט מיט קיין וועלטיליכן זאכן . אונ' דז ער וויל ניט  
גידענקן וויא ער זיך גינערט . וויא באלד ווערט ער האבן דז זיין  
אויף גיצירט . אונ' דא ווערט ער ור ארמן . ער איז זיכר אייך  
ניט צו דר ברמן . איינר דער זיך צו בצדקת וויל האלטן . אז נון  
דא אלהיא איז גישעהן דען אלטן . דרום איז עז פֿור וואר ניט  
וואל גיטון . גלייך אז איך אויך נון דז בייא שפיל דרוף גיברוכט  
הון . דז איך אויך וויל זגן צו דים מול . אל דינג שטיט אין זיינר  
צייט וואל . אונ' איין דינג ניט צו פֿיל נויערט עבן מוש . דא  
בייא איך נון דיא זך בלייבן לוש .  
סליק . סליק . סליק .

This fable<sup>36</sup> I will expound in two ways, beginning with the first: that a woman should behave honorably with her husband and always be ready to serve him, as the old man preached to his wife here. And all pious women should remember this and never stray from the path of righteousness. And in addition there is more that this fable teaches: that no man should be so distracted that he goes about as a dumb beast and doesn't observe things and judge for himself with regard to everything that concerns him. And he shouldn't go about as if he were dead, spending too much time in the honorable places, and doing nothing but pray, and never looking after his house. Such a man may fare like this old man. Because he was so gullible he was left with an empty house. That happens to everyone who insists on being simple-minded and pays no attention to things, and does not want to notice his wife's activities, and won't keep the blade close to the haft, and is ready to trust his wife too much. In the end he will surely regret it, as will one who is excessively pious and wants nothing to do with worldly things and does not want to give thought to the sources of his own livelihood. Soon everything he has will be consumed and he will be poor. Surely one should not have pity on one who wants to be too saintly, as it happened here to the old man. This is not a good way to be, as I have shown in this fable. There is something else I want to say on this

<sup>36</sup> The Yiddish has *bayshpil*. For this term as a translation of the Hebrew *mashal* and its tradition in Yiddish language, see Erika Timm, with the collaboration of Gustav Adolf Beckmann, *Historische Jiddische Semantik. Die Bibelübersetzungssprache als Faktor der Auseinanderentwicklung des jiddischen und des deutschen Wortschatzes* (Tübingen: De Gruyter, 2005), s.v. *bajšpil*, 168–170.

occasion: everything is appropriate in its own time and there should not be too much of anything, but everything in proper measure. And with that I will leave off. The end.<sup>37</sup>

The fable is based on a story in *Meshal haqadmoni*, the tale of the Ram and the Goat, about an old (Muslim) man who lives in Ashdod. The story, which is narrated by the goat (צפיר), forms part of the Cynic's presentation in section II (on penitence), ll. 132–435. The tale is thus embedded in the thesis of the Cynic, which in the second part of the section the Moralists will demonstrate to be wrong.<sup>38</sup> It illustrates an aspect of the work noted by Dan Pagis:

Both sides tell stories about animals [...] and those in their turn tell each other stories about men and women. Thus, in the outer circle there are human protagonists, in the second circle animals, in the innermost again humans. [...] the overall intent is of course meant to be very clear. [...] To quote (or to anthologize) only the challengers' stories would be a distortion of the book's main thrust of ideas.<sup>39</sup>

It is, in fact, precisely such a distortion that we find in the *Kü-bukh* and also in *Sefer mesholim*, the reprint of the *Kü-bukh* published in Frankfurt am Main. At this point it is worth pausing to note how *Sefer mesholim* figures on the wider map of Yiddish printing of the time: it appeared in 1697, four years after the publication of the *editio princeps* of the Yiddish *Meshal haqadmoni*; almost a century later, the book would also appear in Frankfurt am Main.<sup>40</sup> The version of *Meshal haqadmoni* printed in Frankfurt an der Oder in 1693 keeps the interpretation of the fable found in Ibn Sahula's Hebrew work (f. 40r–v),<sup>41</sup> though here the Goat (ציגן באק) adds to the moral, reinforcing the negative message:

האשטו גיהערט וויא עש דען בעל תשובה איז דר גנגן . וויא אים זיין ווייב הוט גימכט בנגן : דרום טוא איך דיר איין גוטן ראט געבן . דו זאלשט לאזן דיא פֿרומקייט אונ' תשובה דר נעבן	Did you hear what happened to the penitent? How his wife made him suffer? Therefore I give you a good suggestion: leave the piousness and the repentance.
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But the Ram (*vider*) rebukes him, explaining that what happened to the husband in the fable could have happened to any man, pious or not, wise or foolish: such is the power of an evil, malicious woman. This is meant to invalidate the Goat's/Cynic's story. Moreover, *Meshal haqadmoni* has no risqué engravings (see for example above, *Kü-bukh*, 48r–v): it ends with the 'horned' husband sitting alone at a table,

<sup>37</sup> This English translation is taken from Katz's edition, 216, with some changes.

<sup>38</sup> This instance of a story told within a story is a good example of what Genette called *récit au second degré*, that is, *metadiégèse*. See Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972), 238–239. See also Loewe, "Introduction," xxxiii–xxxiv.

<sup>39</sup> Pagis, "Variety in Medieval Rhymed Narratives," 94.

<sup>40</sup> *Seyfer Meshal hakadmoni* (Frankfurt am Main: David ben Jacob Kronau, 1763–1764). See Habermann, *Di yidishe oysgabes*, 96, No. 3.

<sup>41</sup> *Seyfer Meshal hakadmoni* (Frankfurt an der Oder: Gershon Wiener, 1693); see Moritz Steinschneider, "Jüdisch-deutsche Literatur," *Serapeum* (Leipzig, 1848–1849), Nos. 211 and 212; Moritz Steinschneider, *Catalogus Librorum Hebræorum in Bibliotheca Bodleiana* (Berlin, 1852–1860), col. 1153; Habermann, *Di yidishe oysgabes*, 96, No. 1.

rather than being mocked and scorned by the whole community, as happens in the *Kü-bukh*:

דש איז די צורה וויא דער מאן טוט קלאגן . אונ' האט גילערנט  
הערנער טראגן : This is the figure showing how the man  
laments and has learned to carry horns



**Figure 6:** *Meshal haqadmoni*, Frankfurt an der Oder, 1693, 40r  
(Jerusalem, NLI, 91 A 514)

## Final Remarks

To return to the opening question as to why the editor of the *Mayse-bukh* declares the *Kü-bukh* to be dangerous and illicit reading, I believe that any definitive answer remains elusive. As mentioned above, Eli Katz suggested that such a negative attitude was in response to the book's sexual allusions, which are neutralized in *Sefer*

*mesholim*, the 1697 reprint of Frankfurt am Main.<sup>42</sup> However, in concluding this paper, which seeks to read the *Kü-bukh* in relation to the Hebrew and Yiddish versions of *Meshal haqadmoni*, I would like to propose an additional explanation.

The “perverted moral” – to use Pagis’ phrase – of the *Kü-bukh* is conspicuously anomalous. This is especially evident in the overall context of Old Yiddish literature of the time, when the genre of *muser literatur* was so rich and comprehensive that it included not only original works of ethical guidance, such as the *Sefer Lev Tov* and the *Brantshpigl*, but also adaptations and rewritings of several Hebrew works, such as *Sefer Orhot Tzaddikim*.<sup>43</sup> I therefore propose that the *Kü-bukh* may have been condemned by the editor of the *Mayse-bukh* precisely because it stands out as a distinctly playful, mischievous work, “as an apple that one would like to bite,” to quote from the introduction,<sup>44</sup> and because its author subverts, in fact, the meaning of some fables. In the examples given above, this does not involve any marked alteration of the tale, but simply the elimination of the frame of the *Meshal haqadmoni*.

First and foremost, the *Kü-bukh* is a masterpiece of early modern Yiddish literature on account of its style and language, its humor and wit. This, together with other aspects of the work – for example, its mocking of some aspects of Christian life, a common practice in Medieval and Renaissance European literature<sup>45</sup> – could, in my view, indicate that the *Kü-bukh*, even though printed in 1595 in Verona *Con licenza de Superiori*, had been composed earlier.<sup>46</sup> The second half of the sixteenth century in Italy was not a time for “daring” books: 1573 had already seen a censored version of the *Decameron*,<sup>47</sup> and works by Bembo, Ariosto, Folengo, and others were banned.<sup>48</sup> In the various versions of the *Index librorum prohibitorum* that followed the Council of Trent, books were proscribed not only on account of the authorities’ hostility to the Lutherans, or the wish to control sexuality; also banned were works of satire, parody, *facetiae*, and humor in general, despite being composed by the

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<sup>42</sup> See Katz, *Book of Fables*, 20–22.

<sup>43</sup> See Jacob Elbaum, *Openness and Insularity. Late Sixteenth Century Jewish Literature in Poland and Ashkenaz* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990), 390–394 [in Hebrew].

<sup>44</sup> *Kü-bukh*, front-page (אז איין אפפיל דאז מאן טוט דריין ביישן).

<sup>45</sup> See Claudia Rosenzweig, “Saladin the Crusader, the Christian Haman and the Off-key Priest. Some Reflections on Christians and Christianity in Yiddish Literary Texts from the Italian Renaissance,” in *Rabbi Judah Moscato and the Jewish Intellectual World of Mantua in the 16th–17th Centuries*, eds. Giuseppe Veltri and Gianfranco Miletto (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 227–246, esp. the part on the “Off-key Priest,” 238–245.

<sup>46</sup> On this, see esp. Neuberg, “The *Kü-bukh*: In Search of Origins” and the bibliography quoted there. It may be added that one of the Renaissance versions of the story about the “Off-key Priest” appears in Poggio Bracciolini’s *Facetiae* (*editio princeps*, 1470), a book that was prohibited by the *Index* in 1564 (for the story, see Poggio Bracciolini, *Facezie*, trans. and ed. Marcello Ciccuto (Milan: Rizzoli, 2002), note CCXXX: *Praedicator multum clamans quomodo confundebatur*, 358; for the attacks on the book, see Gigliola Fragnito, *Rinascimento perduto. La letteratura italiana sotto gli occhi dei censori (secoli XV–XVII)* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2019).

<sup>47</sup> See esp. Raul Mordenti, “Le due censure: la collezione dei testi del Decameron «rassetati» da Vincenzo Borghini e Lionardo Salvati,” in *Le Pouvoir et la plume. Incitation, contrôle et répression dans l’Italie du XVIe siècle* (Paris: Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1982), 235–274.

<sup>48</sup> There is a vast bibliography on the *Index* and Catholic censorship, and its impact on cultural life in Italy. See esp. Vittorio Frajese, *Nascita dell’Indice. La censura ecclesiastica dal Rinascimento alla Controriforma* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2006), and – dealing especially with Italian literature – Mario Infelise, *I libri proibiti da Gutenberg all’Encyclopédie* (Bari: Laterza, 2006) and Fragnito, *Rinascimento perduto*, and the rich bibliography quoted there.

pre-eminent Italian authors of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.<sup>49</sup> Yet, the *Kü-bukh* was printed in 1595. Perhaps the censors overlooked this Yiddish work of *belles-lettres*, giving their authorization without really looking into it.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, as noted earlier, Ibn Sahula's *Meshal haqadmoni* had its own reception in Yiddish literature, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. It became a work of *musar* tout court, read in Germany as well as in Eastern Europe, safeguarded by the author's original frame.

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<sup>49</sup> See esp. Peter Burke, "Frontiers of the Comic in Early Modern Italy," in *Varieties of Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 78–93 and Alberto Asor Rosa, *Storia europea della letteratura italiana. I. Le origini e il Rinascimento* (Torino: Einaudi, 2009), 459–464 and 606–607.

<sup>50</sup> It is possible that censors were mainly engaged in controlling the Talmud and other rabbinical works in Hebrew and Aramaic. Besides, correctors "were supposed, each in his time and territory to supervise the whole of Jewish literature [...]. Even if, as a class, they had been most learned, yet could not one have read with the necessary care each work he corrected; and, in fact, they seem rather to have turned the pages hastily." See the seminal work by William Popper, *The Censorship of Hebrew Books* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1899), 62.