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Jewish Theatres

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Contents

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Italian Jews and Theatre in Early Modern Italy

Abstract

At the turn of the sixteenth century, Italian Jews usually adapted some of the most common motifs cherished by non-Jewish Renaissance scholars to their speculative, scientific, and literary productions. This phenomenon may explain the development of the specific interest by Italian Jews in theatre over the following centuries. While tragedies, comedies, and other dramatic forms inspired by the revival of classical theatre were composed and performed in Italian by Jewish authors for both a Jewish and a non-Jewish audience, more traditional Jewish theatrical genres, such as the *Purimspiel*, were now reinterpreted, in both Hebrew and the local Judaeo-languages, to suit the new stylistic standards current among non-Jews. The growing involvement of Jews in staging activities brought to their wide renown as actors and impresarios, and to the establishment of Jewish dramatic societies.

Keywords: Renaissance theatre; Hebrew literature; Jews in Italy; *Purimspielen*; Leone de' Sommi; Leon Modena

Theatrical performances in Early Modern Italy could be of two kinds, both inspired by previously existing models: staging of specific sections of the Christian liturgy or of narrative passages of the Scriptures; adaptations of classical (mainly Latin) dramas. The new fascination with antiquity displayed by late fifteenth and sixteenth-century authors, who revived Greco-Roman literary genres and adapted them to their times, paved the way to the interference between the two productions. Plots that drew inspiration from the Bible or the sacred representations of the past were adopted for tragedies, comedies, pastoral dramas, and interludes that mainly followed the canons of classical theatre.[1] Characters associated with Judaism (mainly performed by non-Jewish actors) would appear on stage, either to move the highest sentiments of the spectators to virtue or to amuse them; they could be shaped after the most popular repertoire of medieval performances, in which the Jew generally played the villain or the fool,[2] or ac-

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[1] See the classic but still valid Nicoll 1927; Ducharte 1966.

[2] For instance, Judah's character in late Medieval mysteries meant to stress the inclination to evil of contemporary Jews: see Newbegin and Wisch 2012; Newbegin 2014.

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cording to classical tragedy's heroic patterns,[3] or the stereotypical roles of Greco-Latin comedy or Italian *commedia dell'arte*.[4]

In spite of the Rabbinic rules that prevented Jews from adhering to literary trends that were not rooted in the Jewish tradition, Italian communities cherished the most significant productions of non-Jews (see Lesley 1992). Indeed, already in the pre-Modern era, they adopted some of the most common motifs fashionable among their neighbours. For such intellectual borrowings they could either use the holy language or local vernaculars. Starting from the thirteenth century, all over the Mediterranean area, but especially in the Italian peninsula, Jewish intellectuals turned the most important products of non-Hebrew literatures into Hebrew. If this phenomenon triggered the translation of mainly scientific texts, Jews also adopted poetical and narrative 'external' productions in order to stress that their literary legacy did not consist only of religious books. Moreover, by adapting new genres to Hebrew, they could stress the role played by the Bible in the shaping of a universal knowledge: in other words, the language of the Scripture, allegedly held as the most ancient and sacred of all, was flexible enough to be used for purposes other than the liturgical or juridical ones. From a different perspective, creating Hebrew *belles-lettres* that were grounded in Biblical patterns also meant that the Hebrew Scripture treasured all possible knowledge and was ultimately the model of inspiration of the nations.[5]

Such attitude is well expressed, for instance, in the intellectual work of one of the most cultured Italian Jewish intellectuals of the fifteenth century, Yoḥanan ben Yiṣḥaq Alemanno (c. 1435 - c. 1504). An itinerant teacher, like most of his contemporary colleagues, Alemanno spent long periods of his life wandering about the most thriving centres of early Renaissance Italy: Mantua, Ferrara, and Florence. In the latter city, he was inspired also by his non-Jewish acquaintances to compose a Hebrew biography of King Solomon, shaped after the classical genre of the lives of illustrious men. In the introduction of his long *Commentary on Song of Songs*, titled *Ḥešeq Šelomoh* (Solomon's Yearning), Alemanno explains the reasons that induced him to behave like his non-Jewish contemporaries, that drew upon Plutarch or

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[3] On Esther as a tragic heroine in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Italy, see Arbib 2003.

[4] See also below. On the development of such Jewish characters, especially in the seventeenth-century Italian theatre, see Gurney 2015.

[5] As a matter of fact, non-Jews, in their turn, especially in Italy, passionately investigated the traditional forms of Jewish hermeneutics of the Bible in order to found the bases of a universal knowledge belonging to all religious and philosophical systems. On these intellectual phenomena that characterized the encounter of Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals in late Medieval and Early Modern Italy, see Bonfil 1994.

Valerius Maximus to deal with the lives of the *exempla virtutis* (models of virtues) of their own generation (see also Lelli 2004a, 29):

> I shall not, however, amplify this discussion further, because I am very well aware, my son, that you are a wise and understanding man, a Jew who is not used to such long stories about a man and his deeds, and who might say that listening to the bleating of this flock of Solomon's virtues wearies the mind. You may say: "All these virtues are already recorded in the book of *Chronicles*. Why must you recount his statutes and teachings? Praise the Lord with grateful, noble words for He is awesome and praiseworthy". Listen, therefore, to my replies to anyone who would seal his ears from hearing more. First, I greatly envied those among all the nations who praise their idols and compose about a single man whole hosts of books as long as the chronicles of the kings of Israel and Judah combined; while we the community of Jews, do not know how to give two or three particles of praise to one of the holy men of our people. I have, therefore, opened my mouth to glorify and praise King Solomon, may he rest in peace, with many praises. I took it upon myself to put them into a book in an order that will make apparent to all the nations that we have a heart like them.
> (qtd in Lesley 1976, 53).

In Alemanno's words, King Solomon may become the model for the fifteenth century Jewish intellectual who is knowledgeable enough to master all possible contemporary sciences, including the most recent achievements of non-Jewish scholarship.

Focusing on the most popular literary genres among gentiles, and adapting them to the biblical narrative was a specific habit, especially of Northern Italian Judaism at the turn of the sixteenth century. We still have, for instance, lengthy poems on the Scriptural *Books of Kings* in four-line strophes of two rhyming couplets, and a poetic version of the *Books of Samuel* dating to the end of the fifteenth century. Elia Levita (1469-1549), best known for his intellectual collaboration with non-Jews and especially with the Roman Cardinal Egidio Antonini da Viterbo (1469-1532), adapted two chivalric stories, known to him in their Italian version, *Buovo d'Antona* and *Paris e Vienna* into Yiddish; the first one, entitled *Bovo-Buch*, dates back to the first decade of the sixteenth century and is one of the oldest testimonies of Yiddish literature (Bikard 2012, 33). Both works consist of around seven hundred *ottava rima* stanzas each: that was the first time this stylistic pattern was used in German literature. Levita's Yiddish works grounded in Romance literature display the use of grotesque and burlesque elements. This peculiarity is closely related to the inversion of traditional values which is generally associated with Carnival expressions and which was cherished by most Italian sixteenth-century literati, Christian and Jewish (ibid.).

Northern Italian Hebrew manuscripts abound with *Purimspielen* or *Purim-Shpil* plays in *ottava rima*, the best-known possibly being Mordekhay Dato's *Istoria de Purim* (The Account of *Purim*), dating to the second half of the sixteenth century (see Busi 1987; English translation in Tennen 2008). This can be deemed as a significant intercultural phenomenon: plays which were performed during the Jewish festival of *Purim*, followed the patterns of theatrical performances common among Christians, and we should not forget that many Renaissance comedies *all'antica*, like Ludovico Ariosto's (1474-1533) ones, were performed during the pre-Lent period. Indeed, *Purimspiel* productions seem to have been performed already in the twelfth century (Davidson 1907, 123-5; 264-5), when the humorous parody of the *Book of Esther* started enjoying popularity. An interesting and influential example of such a reading, common in Italian communities, is the fourteenth-century Kalonymos ben Kalonymos's *Massekhet Purim* (The Treatise of *Purim*) (Davidson 1907, 115-34) in which the traditional Midrashic interpretation of the Bible is used to provide a comic explanation of contemporary events. However, being the *Purim* festival grounded in the persecution of ancient Persian Jews – *Purimspielen* could also be (and are still to these days) charged with epic and tragic connotations.

A *Purimspiel* can consist of a poetic monologue, or a story performed by several actors – usually the story of Esther, but also the selling of Joseph, Hannah and Samuel, or David and Goliath. As said, the habit of taking biblical stories to stage for a large audience is reminiscent of the Christian sacred representations. However, the osmotic society of sixteenth-century Italy made it possible to portray biblical characters as classical or contemporary figures of the *commedia dell'arte*, and in many *Purimspielen*, for instance, King Ahasuerus was represented as a sort of Jewish *Pantalone*. As we will see later on, in the case of Leone de' Sommi, characters of the non-Jewish comedies *all'antica* merge into biblical figures.

A solemn kind of *Purimspiel*, entirely in Hebrew, is well represented by the third-rime poem titled *Yašir Mošeh* (Moses Will Sing) by Mošeh Kohen of Corfu (see Shmeruk 1971 and Lelli 2007). The long late sixteenth-century composition[6] was recited in front of the Jewish congregation on the Sabbath that precedes the celebration of *Purim* (*Šabbat zakhor*), when the festivity is introduced by the obligation of remembering evil Amalek, the legendary ancestor of Haman. The Corfiot author tells extensively the story of the biblical heroine, the Queen of Persia, by drawing upon phrases that are fully derived from the Scripture and from the most common Rabbinic interpretations of the *Megillah* (the *Scroll of Esther*), and especially those contained in the homonymous treatise of the *Babylonian Talmud* and in the

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[6] The poem was first published in Mantua in 1612; see Lelli 2007, 100-1.

Midraš Esther Rabbah. The poet aims to address his audience in a clear language, by blending different stylistic patterns.[7] The scenic purpose of the composition appears from the very first tercets, when the author calls his audience's attention by stressing the action with frequent dialogues (1-12):

> [The event] took place in King Ahasuerus' days,
> Who listened to Haman's words,
> And watered us with poison and absinthe.
>
> It was him who, forging lethal tools, plotted
> Persecution and massacre, calamity and murder,
> But fell trapped into the net he had disguised.
>
> "These people scattered like cumin, like wild fennel",
> So said he to him, "whose faith is different, now I will rise
> And, if you allow me, I will annihilate them for ever.
>
> Indeed I will wipe out every living being
> Among them, should this please you,
> I will destroy them, they will never rise again".

Even in his lexical choice, the poet adheres to the biblical text, by stressing images that awake the listeners' attention and make the action highly dramatic. Haman's direct discourse, which is shaped after the third chapter of the *Book of Esther*, acquires a solemn gravity compared to the biblical model. The rhythm of each verse creates a narrative continuity over the 428 tercets of the Hebrew hymn. Moses of Corfu deliberately uses Dante's iambic hendecasyllable (see Bregman 1992), paralleling the contemporaneous revival of this verse for classical theatre.

The above-mentioned tendency of Italian Jews to adopt literary genres from the non-Jewish society (see Lelli 2004b), may explain the development of the specific interest by Italian Jews in non-Jewish scenic activities. Thus, despite the Rabbinic rules against theatre, seen as a place of promiscuous encounters and contamination with diverse non-Jewish religious cultures,[8] Italian Jews stressed the primeval origin of sacred representations in the Bible, and especially in the *Book of Job* (see Leone de' Sommi 1968, 13-4). Between the first and the second decade of the sixteenth century, Yosef ben Šemu'el Ṣarfati (?-1527) translated from Castilian into Hebrew Fernando de Rojas' *La Celestina*[9] and, by the end of the sixteenth century, Terence's play *Eunuchus* was printed in the holy language in Mantua, as well as a *Ma'aśeh*

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[7] See Hebrew original in Lelli 2007, 104-5 (translation mine).

[8] See, e.g., *Bab. Talm. 'Avodah Zarah* 18b, where mention is made of the sacrifices offered in theatres to pagan gods.

[9] Only the introduction of Ṣarfati's translation has come down to us: Cassuto (1935) highlights that this could have been "the first comedy in Hebrew".

Yosef (*The Story of Joseph*, apparently a dramatization of the biblical narrative, now lost – see Schirmann 1979, 47-8; 54; Leone de' Sommi 1988, 21). In this perspective, Yoḥanan Alemanno's views can be compared with those of the main representative of the Renaissance Jewish theatrical development, the Mantuan Yehudah ben Yiṣḥaq Portaleone, also known as Leone de' Sommi (1525-1592) (on whom, see below). In his Hebrew comedy, which will be described in detail later on, De' Sommi lets a personification of Wisdom introduce his play by the following words:

> Now some playwrights among the gentiles have looked down upon the Jews because they seem to lack this literary facility. It is for this reason that I have this day resolved to show that the Hebrew language is not inferior to its artistic power. Indeed what is a crowning glory for other languages is but a glitter of a shoe-buckle for Hebrew. Hence, men should not deem it a defect in that language because they have not seen it cast, ere now, into a pleasing comedy. Rather, it is because the words that constitute this holy tongue are of most ancient and wondrous origin, and it has seemed unworthy for such sacred words to be said solely for human pleasure. But what other languages can do, Hebrew can do better. The very proof of this statement I shall soon place before your eyes. For if the play form is novel for Hebrew, its capacity for creating parables and proverbs is well-known, ad so can make it even more marvelous as a medium for theatrical entertainment. (Leone de' Sommi 1988, 68)

As secular entertainment began to replace performances on religious themes, and all the more so throughout the sixteenth century, Jews of talent were more and more requested as actors, dancers, and musicians. Indeed, the role played by Jewish actors is well known already for the fifteenth century (Leone de' Sommi 1988, 16). We have evidence of costume performances of biblical episodes that were requested from the Jewish communities by the local Italian rulers, and especially on the occasion of wedding ceremonies. For instance, in Pesaro in 1475 Jewish actors were hired for the wedding of Costanzo Sforza and Camilla Marzano d'Aragona to stage a pantomime of the encounter of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon (see *Le Nozze di Costanzo Sforza* 1946; Sparti 2011, 240). A few years later, in 1489, and again in Pesaro, the community enacted the apocryphal story of Judith and Holofernes[10] in the framework of the nuptial celebrations for Giovanni Sforza, Costanzo's son, and Maddalena Gonzaga. In Northern Italy many actors were Jewish. In 1520 Ercole Gonzaga of Man-

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[10] Even though not included in the Hebrew Scriptural canon, the *Book of Judith* was widely known among Jews and especially appreciated in fifteenth century-Italy: see Lelli 2004b, 62-6.

tua invited two Jewish players, Solomon and Jacob, from Ferrara to perform at court. In 1549 a Jewish company presented a comedy at the wedding of Duke Francesco III in Mantua. In 1563 a troupe comprised mainly of Jews presented Ludovico Ariosto's *Suppositi* (the comedy of the *Supposes*) at the Gonzaga court to honour the visit of two archdukes of Austria (Leone de' Sommi 1988, 16-7). In 1568 a troupe mainly composed of Jews performed *Le Due Fulvie* (The Two Fulvias) by the local playwright Massimo Faroni. In 1583 they staged the comedy *Gli Ingiusti Sdegni* (The Unfair Disdains) by Bernardino Pino with dances by the Jewish ballet master, Isacchino Massarano (on whom, see Sparti 2011, 245). Under Dukes Guglielmo and Vincenzo I Gonzaga, Jews were required to perform almost annually. Jews used theatrical productions as a way of paying tribute to their patrons and also to pay their community tax (see Roth 1930, 198-9). It should be remembered that the figure of a Jewish court musician – dancer – singer and entertainer became popular from the end of the fifteenth century: the brothers Guglielmo and Giuseppe da Pesaro (the first one also known by his convert's name Giovanni Ambrosio) introduced new modes of dance imported from other European regions into Italian courts (Guglielmo Ebreo of Pesaro 1993; Sparti 2011). The musical talent of Jewish artists certainly contributed to their affirmation as actors. On the other hand, because of the mobility of the artists, musical and theatrical skills could be easily associated with Jews, who were used to frequently change residence and consequently to speak various languages, a further prerequisite for performing in front of diverse audiences. A significant evidence of such a perception of Jews in Northern Italy appears in the characterization of the Jewish protagonist of Ludovico Ariosto's *Il Negromante* (*The Necromancer*, completed in 1510 and first staged in Ferrara in 1528) (see Ansani 2016). The chief character's deeds are partly recalled for the audience's benefit by his attendant, Nibbio (Kite), at the beginning of the second act of the comedy. In a monologue, Nibbio reveals for the first time the actual name of his master, the astrologer Giacchelino or Jachelino, an Italianate diminutive of Hebrew Yeḥiʾel. From Nibbio's words, Giacchelino is presented as a blurred figure, whose real name, homeland and religion are not understandable at first sight:[11]

> My master, Jachelino, certainly has great confidence in himself . . . / he . . . professes to be a philosopher, / an alchemist, a doctor, an astrologer, a magician, / and even a conjurer of spirits . . . / . . . Like nomads, / we go from place to place, / and wherever he passes he leaves his imprint / like a snail or, for a more fitting comparison, / like fire or lightning; and in each place, / in order to disguise himself, / he changes his name, his dress, and his coun-

[11] English translation in Ariosto 1975, 116. Italian original text in Ariosto 1964, 431-2.

try. / Now he calls himself Peter, now John; now he pretends / to come from
Greece, now from Egypt, now from Africa. / In reality, he's a Jew, / and he
was among those who were expelled from Castile . . .

In Ariosto's comedy we witness one of the first instances of a Jewish the-
atrical character that appears to blend the qualities of the scornful person-
age of Medieval sacred representations with the stereotypes of the classical
comedy. Ariosto parodies contemporary Jewish scholars that could be seen
in Northern Italian cities, hired by princely courts for their astrological
competences. Such a characterization was common also in the Italian Jew-
ish society of the previous centuries, and appears, for instance, in the satir-
ical portrayals of contemporary intellectuals by Kalonymos ben Kalonymos
(in his already mentioned *Megillat Purim*) or by the latter's contemporane-
ous Immanuel Romano (in his *Maḥbarot 'Immanu'el* [Immanuel's Composi-
tions]; see especially Mahberet 8).

From all this emerged a different and less solemn Judeo-Italian *Purim-
spiel* (see Busi 1987 and Tennen 2008) that addressed a more variegated au-
dience than the mere Jewish community (see Steinschneider 1881-2 and
Schirmann 1964). We know, for instance, from Marin Sanudo's journals
that on March 4th 1531, on the day following *Purim*, "there was performed
among the Jews in the 'Geto' [the Venetian ghetto] a very fine comedy; but
no Christian could attend by order of the Council of Ten. It ended at ten
o'clock at night". This was almost certainly an annual event, which gentiles
must have attended in earlier years, thus arousing the disapproval of the
city authorities (see Roth 1930, 199).

We have observed the success of the Mantuan community's theatre.
This was largely due to the skills of the already mentioned Leone de' Som-
mi,[12] who wrote several comedies (as well as pastoral dramas, and inter-
ludes – see Belkin 1986) in Italian, of which only a few survive in manu-
script.[13] De' Sommi was a *yešivah* teacher and, due to his outstanding ed-
ucation, he became the secretary of the important Mantuan Academy "of
the *Invaghiti*" (the Lovesick), and enjoyed great fame all over Europe as
an impresario at the Gonzaga court. He is the author of the celebrated *Di-
aloghi in materia di rappresentazioni sceniche* (Dialogues on Scenic Stag-
ing), the first ever written Italian treatise on the subject.[14] He is deemed to

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[12] On Leone's life and works see Leone de' Sommi 1988, 18-20; Belkin 1997.

[13] Most of Leone's extant works were acquired by the Library of Turin which was
almost completely destroyed by fire in 1904. There survives today *Hirifile*, and *Le tre
sorelle* (The Three Sisters), besides fragments of other comedies. Leone's Hebrew play
reached us in many different manuscript copies. See Leone de' Sommi 1988, 19-20; Leo-
ne de' Sommi 1990.

[14] Composed around 1565; see Leone de' Sommi 1968.

be the author of the very first Hebrew comedy extant to this day in the history of Jewish literature. In 1931 Haim Schirmann discovered and attributed to De' Sommi this comedy (Schirmann 1931; Leone de' Sommi 1946). The title of the play is *Ṣaḥut Bediquta de-Qiddušin*, an Aramaic formula that can be translated literally as "an eloquent farce [i.e. comedy] on wedding" and that has been recently published in an English version by Alfred Golding as *A Comedy of Betrothal* (Leone de' Sommi 1988). De' Sommi's play follows the stylistic patterns of contemporary non-Jewish theatre *all'antica* (e.g. the five act-division, the location of the action in a *piazza* before the houses of the three main characters), but its plot results from the adaptation of traditional motifs inspired by the Scripture and Rabbinic literature, as in the *Purimspiel* genre. Indeed, the author takes the move from Midrashic themes that widely circulated also in Medieval literature (see, e.g., *Tanḥuma Lekh Lekha* 8, *Bab. Talmud Gittin* 8b, 29a and their multiple interpretations in the thirteenth-century *Sefer Ḥasidim* [Book of the Pious] or ʿImmanuʿel Romano's *Maḥbarot ʿImmanuʾel*), but merges this sub-text into the plot of contemporary comedies, such as Ludovico Ariosto's *Lena*. The moral connotation of the Midrashic subject was possibly chosen also for its parallels with the Christian Counterreformation trends that meant to reduce the too sensual aspects of Renaissance comic theatre. Such a moral intent, which would become more and more crucial in the theatrical production of the following centuries, is still tempered in De' Sommi's text: vices are blamed, hypocrisy is ridiculed, and justice is praised, although the context is a merry atmosphere, which faithfully describes the contemporary habits of the Jews of the Mantuan area (whereas in later productions the relation of the literary text with real life is less apparent). The linguistic skill, that characterizes Medieval Jewish authors, appears at its best in Leone's work, where biblical and Rabbinic sentences are often provided with new bizarre meanings. To give the idea of this multilayered text, here follows Golding's English translation of the entire second scene of the fourth act, in which two young *yešivah* students appear:

> JAIR. Soon, Joktan, my good friend, there will be heard in the house the sound of joy and gladness, the sound of bride and bridegroom, for our law instructor, Master Greedy, has given his youngest daughter in marriage to a certain highly esteemed and honourable man of substance in the community.
> JOKTAN. When will we begin to trip the light fantastic and otherwise have a gay old time?
> JAIR. On this very day, old fellow. Let's hope that his son-in-law will proclaim in the words of the prophet Micah, "And they shall learn . . . no more," since Master Greedy will be occupied and won't be able to keep an eye on us.

Joktan. May it be the Lord's will! Amen. What I'm really worried about is that our Master will impose extra assignments on us to solve problems and otherwise provide answers to his legal questions. You know as well as I that for the entire month just past we have done absolutely no study at all and have forgotten whatever we have learned.

Jair. With words like these I can keep him happy. For I already have a question to stump all the experts on Jewish Law[15] when they try to provide an answer. In the scroll[16] commemorating the Feast of Esther it is written: "And they hung Haman".[17] Yet in the chapter dealing with Balak[18] it is definitely written, "And the children of Israel consumed the manna[19] - that is, in Hebrew "Ha-Man, Ha . . . man - Haman" So how could the Jews, who had been commanded not to eat carrion, eat Ha-Man, then eat from the body of the hanged Haman?

Joktan. That one I'm up on. The answer that Rabbi Bilaam, the son of Rabbi Bibi, quoting his father, gave was: "What says the Torah? - 'And they consumed the manna', that is, Ha-Man . . . Haman." That serves notice on us that in the merry time of *Purim*, the feast of Esther, we are expected to eat sweet cakes made of fine flour and oil, and ever after they are to be known by Haman's name.[20] So it may always be said that the taste of manna was like the honeycake.[21]

Jair. A fine explanation originating from Rabbi Bibi of blessed memory.

Joktan. You'll see that our good teacher will be satisfied with the way we solve these tricky questions, even if our answer is not strictly kosher.[22] But what I'm really frightened about is that he'll take it into his head to have us compose and learn by heart some long speech praising the bride and groom, so that we may deliver it at the wedding banquet. In that case we'll spend our time just looking at the fancy dishes without being able to eat them.

Jair. May such a disaster never befall us! Ever! But look! I believe a have a way to get us out of that terrible situation.

Joktan. From whence comes our help?

Jair. I shall let it be known that I have a headache and have taken to my bed.

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[15] The Halakhah, or Rabbinic law.

[16] He is referring to the Megillah, the most common name of the *Book of Esther*.

[17] Est. 7:10.

[18] This biblical section (Num. 22:2-25:9) has nothing to do with the episode of the manna. Maybe the author hints at the Rabbinic connection between Haman and the pseudo-prophet Balaam that appears in this biblical section and is later recalled by Joktan in the name of "Rabbi Bilaam".

[19] Ex. 16:25.

[20] Joktan is referring to "Haman's ears" or *Hamantaschen*: see below.

[21] Ex. 16:25.

[22] The use of this term is ambiguous, as it literally means 'fit [according to religious law]' and is generally referred to food, which is what interests more the two interlocutors.

JOKTAN. I also thought of pulling such a stunt. But on second thought I realized that if I acted like that I still would not be allowed to enjoy myself by sampling the pastries and dainties that are sure to be piled high upon the table. I really would suffer then, if I were deprived of such wonderful foodstuff!
JAIR. There's none smarter than you in anticipating what might happen. Let's think of another remedy for our difficulty, so that we will not have to endure punishment, should this calamity strike us.
JOKTAN. Lo and behold, the Master is leaving the house!
JAIR. I'm getting out of here fast.
JOKTAN. And I'm already out of sight![23]

In this lively dialogue we can feel the dense rhythm of the dialectic exchange or debate of a Talmudic academy,[24] that here is alluded to in parody. The purely speculative question suggested by Jair is built on the traditional hermeneutic rules that allow the interpreters of the Hebrew Scripture to compare two different biblical passages in which the same word (or even a homophone) occurs (the so-called *gezerah šawah*): in this case, Jair remarks that the Hebrew word for *manna* sounds exactly like Haman, the name of the evil enemy of the people of Israel in the *Book of Esther*. According to Rabbinic rules, then, the two terms have to be interpreted in close connection. But here arises another major issue concerning *kašrut*, or dietary law. The apparent conundrum can be solved in a paradoxical way, by hinting at the traditional *Purim* dessert, generally known to this day by the Yiddish term *Hamantasche*: the biblical honey cakes then are nothing but the 'Haman's ears' of the Jewish cuisine. Higher forms of exegesis are reduced to daily issues by two greedy *yešivah* students who target all their juridical knowledge to food. Of special significance in this context is the name of the students' teacher, Hamdan, which can be translated 'Greedy'. The overall situation is hilarious and allows the audience to set the whole action in the framework of the joyous feast of *Purim* which was very likely the time of the year when the play was staged.

Characters are designed according to the categories of classical theatre: young men whose only aim is to satisfy their appetites and escape their duties. Jair adapts the biblical verse from the prophetic *Book of Micah* "neither shall they learn war any more" to his own expectations, by omitting the word 'war'. Even the English translation of the dialogue allows the modern reader to perceive the constant reference of the author to the Bible: a case in point is the expression "From whence comes our help?", an evident hint at Ps. 121:1.

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[23] Leone de' Sommi 1988, 107-8. Hebrew original in Leone de' Sommi 1946, 220-2.
[24] On the centrality of *yešivah* education in Renaissance Italian Jewish society, see Bonfil 1993, 17-27.

By and large, the parody of the Scripture as well as of the most traditional forms of Jewish education represents the real innovation of Leone's Hebrew comedy. Its manifest meaning can be fully understandable only to a Jewish audience who is well trained in the contemporary patterns of non-Jewish comic theatre, as well as its more hidden message, that the utter study of the *Torah* and the Rabbinic literature can result either in the authentic knowledge of God or in the mere achievements of mundane goods.

The intent of letting Jewish audiences fully understand the most profound moral meanings of the Scripture according to new literary genres was sought also by Italian Jewish authors of tragedies. For instance, the Venetian Leon Modena (Yehudah Aryeh of Modena, 1571-1648), possibly the best-known Italian Rabbi of the Renaissance, in the introduction to the edition of his *L'Ester: Tragedia tratta dalla Sacra Scrittura* (Esther, A Tragedy Drawn from the Holy Scripture)[25] states that he composed his drama in order to establish a closer relation between "Rabbinic interpretations, called *Midrašim* by the Jews" and "the gravity . . . requested by tragedies and heroic holiest narrations" (Leon Modena 1619, 9-10). Modena's only extant play is introduced by the character of Truth, who remarks that the author's intent to draw upon Midrashic material aims at the "greater delight of the learned" and is motivated by "truthfulness of the matter" (Leon Modena 1619, 10). Published in Venice on the day of *Purim* 1619, Modena's drama was the revised version of a 1558 *Purimspiel* by the Portuguese former convert Salomón Usque (see Roth 1930, 199; Zavan 2004. See also Canals Piñas 2001), later elaborated by the Venetian Eliʿezer di Graziano Levi, Modena's maternal uncle. Usque and Levi's work had enjoyed such a good reception[26] that its several performances were attended by both Jews and Christians (Zavan 2004, 121-2; Arbib 2003, 112). The moral goals of Leone's tragedy appear, for instance, in his sympathetic portrayal of Queen Vashti, who follows contemporary melodramatic patterns. In the fourth scene of the first act, Vashti laments the tragic fate that befell her, right at the time when she was "living merrily in a high state":

> Well, may I bemoan Nature, a mother / to others, and to us a cruel step-mother, / doing such harm to us in making us women, / Ah feminine sex, unfortunate sex, / born into the world only as a target / for all the tragic blows struck / by this, which I call death and the world [calls] life; / sex that receives only sorrows / and misery and misfortunes in any degree, / In

[25] Modena's *Ester* was published by Giacomo Sarzina's Venetian press in 1619, but its composition dated back to 1613: see Piattelli 1968, 163.
[26] According to some scholars, the original drama was written in Spanish, while others hold it was composed in Italian: see Roth 1930, 199; Zavan 2004, 120-3.

whatever condition she be born, [whether] low / or in a high situation . . .
(Arbib 2003, 124)

In the seventeenth century, Italian Jewish theatre was deeply influenced by the presence of *converso*-born authors who drew inspiration for their dramas from Iberian *autos sacramentales*. Such theatrical forms were introduced to Italian communities mainly by playwrights who came from the Netherlands.[27] The Amsterdam-born Mošeh ben Mordekhay Zacuto (1620s?-1697) descended from a family of former *converso* Jews. After moving to Italy, where he lived in Verona, Padua, Venice and Mantua, around 1640 he wrote the drama *Yesod ʿOlam* (The Pillar of the World), which takes the move from Midrashic re-readings of Abraham's deeds from the *Book of Genesis* (see Zacuto 2016, 21-5). Before the discovery of De' Sommi's play, this was deemed to be the first drama extant to this day ever composed in Hebrew. The author maintained the three unities – of plot, time, and place – of classical theatre but the play, possibly composed for *Purim*, consists only of lengthy poetic monologues (Zacuto 1875; Melkmann 1967). Even the best-known poem by Zacuto, *Tofteh ʿArukh* (Hell Set, or A Description of Hell), seemingly inspired by Dante's *Comedy*, is divided in acts and belies a strong influence of contemporary Spanish theatre (see Zacuto 2016, 21-5). In the context of the then flourishing Venetian academies, Śimḥah ben Abraham Calimani (1699-1784) composed a drama influenced by contemporary pastoral plays:[28] his three-act *Qol Śimḥah* (A Voice of Joy or Simhah's Voice) features only moral virtues and vices. His better-known contemporaneous Mošeh Ḥayyim ben Yaʿaqov Luzzatto (aka Ramḥal, 1707-1746/47), well versed in all fields of literature and thought, composed at least three Hebrew dramas: *Maʿaśeh Šimšon* (Samson's Deeds) centres upon the conflict between sensual love and religious and civic duties; besides biblical characters, four allegoric virtues appear in his three-act play; *Migdal ʿOz* (Powerful Tower), in three acts, elaborates upon the traditional metaphoric story of a princess that will marry the first man who will be able to enter her father's private garden. Young Šalom (Peace) succeeds, but is cheated by Zifa (Deceit) and only after many trials he manages to marry Šelomit. Luzzatto's drama follows in the footsteps of Torquato Tasso's *Aminta* and Giovan Battista Guarini's Pastor *fido*, but rereads their pastoral setting according to contemporary Kabbalistic doctrines. The last and most celebrated Luzzatto's three-act drama is titled *La-Yešarim Tehillah* (Praise to the

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[27] On these dramatic productions, see El Macabeo 2006; Gomez 2007.

[28] See Schirmann 1979, 54-94. See also Belkin 1986. Leon Modena wrote a pastoral play on Rachel and Jacob and his pupil Benedetto Luzzatto composed the pastoral drama *L'amor possente* (Powerful Love): see Roth 1930, 199. On Jewish participation in Venetian academies, see Veltri and Chajes 2018.

Righteous) and features only moral representations of vices and virtues. Luzzatto's praise of faith and moral reason echoes the contemporary values expressed by Arcadian melodrama.[29] Jewish playwrights and actors greatly contributed to the development of Italian theatre throughout the Modern era: their artistic activity was still highly praised in the nineteenth century when Jewish Dramatic Societies flourished in several Northern Italian cities.[30]

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[29] See Luzzatto 1972; Rathaus 1989; Tamani 2004, 216-20.
[30] See Roth 1930, 200.

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