# Shock and Entertain: Gentile-Jewish Romances from Bohemia, 1830s-1850s

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## **ABSTRACT**

Die vorliegende Studie analysiert eine Auswahl tschechischer und deutscher Texte aus der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts, deren Handlung auf transgressiven Romanzen zwischen Juden und Nichtjuden aufgebaut ist. Obwohl diese Texte verschiedenen Gattungen angehören, können sie alle als Modelle für den Ausschluss von Juden aus der nichtjüdischen Gesellschaft interpretiert werden. Die Analyse hebt die Verwendung von transregressiven Beziehungen als schockierendes und zugleich unterhaltsames Konzept hervor, das letztendlich den Status quo der christlich-jüdischen Beziehungen bestätigt.

## **SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER**

Tschechisches Drama; Unterhaltung; Mischehe zwischen Konfessionen; Juden in der Literatur; *la belle Juive*; Melodrama; Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts; Transgression; Trivialkultur

## **ABSTRACT**

The present study discusses a selection of Czech and German texts from the first half of the nineteenth century that are based on transgressive relationships between Gentiles and Jews. Although belonging to various genres, they can all be interpreted as models of exclusion of Jews from Gentile society. The analysis highlights the use of transgression as a shocking and entertaining concept that ultimately reasserts the status quo of Gentile-Jewish relations.

## **KEY WORDS**

Czech drama; damsel in distress; entertainment; interconfessional marriage; Jews in literature; la belle Juive; melodrama; nineteenth century literature; transgressive relationships; Trivialkultur

In 1842, a German visitor to the Habsburg Monarchy, Johann Georg Kohl,¹ reported from Lemberg "a very melancholy" story unfolding upon his arrival to the Galician metropolis: a beautiful young Jewish woman, only fourteen years old, the only daughter of one of the wealthiest jewelers and bankers of Lemberg, had made the acquaintance of a young German officer. The two fell in love. However, as her parents strongly opposed

<sup>1</sup> Johann Georg Kohl (1808–1878), a native of Bremen, lawyer by education, developed an interest in geography and traveled throughout Eastern Europe and North America.

this relationship, the young woman took refuge in the Convent of the Holy Sacrament and announced her intention to convert to Christianity in order to consummate her relationship. In this situation, Kohl reports, the parents undertook all steps possible to win their daughter back. The aged mother appeared in the convent, reminding her daughter of the holy laws her parents and grandparents had faithfully followed. Her appeals were buttressed by a casket packed with pearls and jewels:

Bribes, threats, and entreaties, however, were alike lost upon the obdurate child. "Mother, I belong to a Christian, and know you no more," was her cold and hardhearted reply to all. (Kohl 1846: 454)

Pressed by his travel schedule, Kohl left Lemberg without being able to report the outcome. Thus, we have no way of completing his story, and, in fact, one may even wonder whether he was reporting on a real event or simply appropriating local folklore to produce a thrilling episode in his travelogue. All one can affirm is an apparent demand for romances that shocked and entertained by playing with the idea of a Gentile-Jewish romance.

# 1. OLD FARCES

By the time Kohl was writing, the interest in transgressive Gentile-Jewish relationships was in full swing in European literatures. For our purposes a mention of Walter Scott's Ivanhoe (1820) will suffice. The transgressive nature of Rebecca and Ivanhoe's relationship in Scott's novel was immediately recognized, and some period adaptations cut to the chase already in their title, as in Der Templer und die Jüdin [The Templar and the Jewess], the 1829 Ivanhoe opera by the German composer Heinrich Marschner (1795–1861). However, Scott's narrative is not only about Rebecca and Ivanhoe. The novel actually includes two Jewish characters: a Jewish daughter and her Jewish father. In this way Scott shifted the perspective in a new way by indicting that the otherwise segregated and opaque Jewish world has some texture: Jews live in families. This was a move that opened the novel to Gentile empathy as the family still represented a firm building block of society.

Although texts that present Jews as a community of sorts can be occasionally found,² earlier periods typically depicted Jews differently. To stay in the first part of the Czech nineteenth century, an early adaptation of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* provides an example. The play circulated in a heavily mangled puppet version titled Žid Siloch [Shylock the Jew], by Matěj Kopecký (1775–1847), a puppeteer active between the 1810s–1840s. As common with puppeteers, Kopecký freely recycled operatic libretti, pieces of *commedia dell'arte*, and garden variety itinerant dramas, including *Don Šajn* [Don Juan] and *Dr. Faustus*. He thus represents an era that had little interest in transgressive romance. His Shakespeare adaptation focuses mainly on Shylock while dealing with the behavior of his daughter Jessica only marginally. Quite in line with folk entertainment – and folk antisemitism – Kopecký transformed the wealthy Venice

<sup>2</sup> See the anonymous novel Das jüdische Großmütterchen (Anonymous 1798/99). I am grateful to Václav Smyčka for the reminder.

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merchant into a peddler. Here is an excerpt from the song, in Germanized Czech, that his Shylock sings after returning to Venice from a trip:

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Aj, já jsem židháček z Janovy, jú,
mám pěkné zbožíčko khozlovi, jú,
|: pro phány, též pro phaničky,
pajnklajdr, vesty a rukavičky. :|
Aj, šönes kazimír v phapíru, jú,
prodávám na dlouhou míru, jú,
|: kdo se mnou jedenkrát jen handluje,
then mne i pho druhé zas miluje. :|

(Kopecký 1862: 218)
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[Hey, I am a little Jew from Genoa, yay, I have nice stuff from the goat skin, yay, For the gentlemen and also the ladies Trousers, vests and gloves.

Hey, beautiful cashmere, yay, I sell by a long measure, ya y, He who deals with me just once Will love me the second time too.]

Kopecký knew his audience. By transforming Shakespeare's merchant into a peddler, or *Pingeljude*, he came very close to the *Trivialkultur* of market songs.<sup>3</sup> When dealing with Jews, this culture typically focused on a detached Jewish character, representing him as a cheat, swindler, money lender, and the like. The main point was not only to outwit him and make him ridiculous, but in some case even to kill him.

By contrast, the plots and characters of the "new wave" are more complex and less satirical. The narrative is now typically based on a romantic relationship in which a Gentile man, often a courtier, engages a Jewish woman, whose very presence makes the new plots different. A Jewish father stands by, completing the backbone of the plot. Significantly, the crude entertainment at the Jews' expense that is visible in older farces now gives way to narratives that provide space for the reader to negotiate issues of traditional order and authority while enjoying a new kind of entertainment based on the consuming psychology of romantic transgressions. I propose to classify these plots in three ways: melancholic tragedies, real tragedies, and happy-end tragedies.

<sup>3</sup> See "The Entertaining Song About a Merry Jew" (undated, nineteenth cent., National Museum, Prague, KP A7-1), a similar song in Germanized Czech sung by a Jewish peddler.

## 2. NEW PLOTS

# 2.1 MELANCHOLIC TRAGEDIES: JEWS DISAPPEAR

The melancholic tragedy has already been exemplified by reference to Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. Although Scott's Ivanhoe and Rebecca are on the brink of a taboo violation, their relationship will result in neither punishment nor anything dramatic. Rebecca – and her father – will simply be erased from the story. Her place will be assumed by Lady Rowena, Rebecca's noble and magnanimous Christian competitor, who encourages Rebecca in their final conversation to convert and stay in England. Rebecca rejects the proposal with "calm melancholy reigning in her soft voice":

I may not change the faith of my fathers like a garment unsuited to the climate in which I seek to dwell [...] (Scott 1998: 400)

The two Jews, Isaac of York and his daughter Rebecca, leave England in the end. This is a melancholy solution – note "calm melancholy" in Rebecca's voice – which renders Jews "soft" losers rather than victims of violence. Melancholy allows us to invest our empathy in losers.

Ivanhoe was not lost on the Czechs. Scott's influence in Czech literature is exemplified by  $Templáři \ v \ \check{C}echách$  [Templars in Bohemia, 1843], a novel by Prokop Chocholoušek (1819–1864). The plot presents a Jewish father and his daughter, both second-tier characters in a grand narrative about Templars set in medieval Bohemia. The daughter enters a romantic relationship with a Christian, and just as in Ivanhoe, she eventually becomes a "soft" loser. As no compromise can be reached, the two Jews leave Bohemia – they disappear.

## 2.2 TRAGIC TRAGEDIES: JEWS ARE KILLED

The notion of a melancholic tragedy makes sense only if we contrast it with what I call a "tragic tragedy." One such case is *Der Rabbi von Prag* [The Rabbi of Prague], by the German-language Bohemian author Uffo Daniel Horn<sup>4</sup> (1842).<sup>5</sup> Set in Prague around 1600, the story begins with an intriguing depiction of a nighttime visit by the Emperor Rudolf II and his astronomer Tycho de Brahe in the house of Rabbi Löw, a famous scholar and the leader of the Jewish community, in the Jewish Town. While the three men are happily laying the foundations of Magic Prague – they converse about astronomy, Golem-like gadgets, and other magic topics – Löb Ben Isaac, a venerable member of the Jewish community, enters in utmost desperation, for he has just discovered that his daughter Rahel is in a romantic relationship with Count Chlum, a nobleman well-known at the imperial court. Löb Ben Isaac is devastated, while

<sup>4</sup> Uffo Daniel Horn (1817–1860), born in Trutnov/Trautenau in the German-speaking region of Bohemia, wrote numerous novels on Czech historical topics. He was also active in liberal politics.

The list of narratives in which the transgressing Jewish woman dies could be extended. Cf. Das Brautgeschenk by Julius August Köllner-Werdenau, an author who moved in literary circles in Prague (Köllner-Werdenau 1840; in Czech translation in the same year), or the grand opera La Juive (1835), by Jacques-François-Fromental-Élie Halévy, which enjoyed great success across Europe.

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Rabbi Löw's position becomes rather delicate. Having just forged a friendship with the Emperor, he suggests to Löb Ben Isaak that he be conciliatory, since marrying the daughter to a courtier will benefit the Jewish community. Seeing that all powers have conspired against him, the Jewish father pulls out his dagger and kills his daughter with a single stroke. In a few moments he breaks down himself, dying in front of the shocked onlookers. This is a horror story in which the transgressor, the young Jewish woman, dies, as does her Jewish executioner. The story is a model. In this subgenre, Jews do not simply disappear: they die.

# 2.3 HAPPY-ENDING TRAGEDIES

Some of the tragedies on our list seem to move in the tragic direction but conclude happily. Such an outcome is possible because the plots exploit the motif of hidden identity. Specifically, when the transgressing Jewish woman is about to be executed, her true identity is revealed. Without knowing it, she is really an adopted Christian child, and so she is saved.

Among the Czech-language examples of this subgenre is *Israelitka* [The Israelite Woman] (1845) by Václav Kliment Klicpera (1792–1859), a prominent Czech dramatist of the 1830s and 1840s. Set in medieval Bohemia, the play features Daniel, a Jewish merchant; Juta, his daughter; and a young Czech aristocrat with whom Juta falls in love. A relationship such as this is punishable by death. However, as the force of the law seems to be taking over and Juta is being handed over to the henchman, her father Daniel steps forth to reveal a stunning secret: although brought up in a Jewish family, Juta is really a Christian child adopted – actually bought – by Daniel and his by now deceased wife as their child had died. The play ends with a happy end as nothing stands in the way of a wedding of two Christians.<sup>6</sup>

Klicpera's play deserves special attention because of several remarkable episodes. The court hearing reveals the reason as to why the two lovers came together at all – Juta's Christian lover met her while she was spontaneously admiring the image of the Virgin Mary:

Viděl jsem ji, před rokem již, v městském háji u Březohradu, [159] stojící tam u obrazu Boží roditelky, pod tím dubem, kde na kmeně věkovitém sídlí ta matka nejsvětější [...]. Stálatě tam okouzlená, jako smyslem pominulá [...]. (Klicpera 1847: 158f.)

[I saw her already a year ago in a grove near Březohrad, standing there before the image of God's mother, under that oak upon whose trunk rests the most sacred mother assumes her space. [...] She was standing there enchanted, as if bereft of her senses [...]

Upon seeing her before the sacred image, her lover to be proceeds to explain the meaning of the image to her and guides her through the basics of Christian faith.

<sup>6</sup> The list of happy-ending tragedies can be extended. Cf. Anton Guido Polz's *Die Jüdin: Vaterländische Novelle* [The Jewess: A Patriotic Novella] (Polz 1840; Czech translation 1841).

The scene is remarkable in that it anticipates the "happy end" in an essentialist manner. Juta's interest in a Christian image is presented as a manifestation of her substantive, i.e., Christian identity. Hence her seemingly spontaneous and completely unmediated attraction to the image of Virgin Mary is suggested to be deeply authentic, indelible, and non-negotiable.

The finale of this play certainly brought relief to the Gentile viewer on a number of counts. The character who might have been a focus of empathy throughout the entire action, the Jewish would-be bride, is *not* Jewish after all and so investing empathy in her, although initially just a wager, is eventually rewarded. As the outcome is a solution that does not involve any transgression, the viewer has no reason to change his/her fundamental beliefs –the order of things prevails. But because much of the action was an ambivalent game of line-crossing, diversion is one of the fringe benefits.

To complicate the argument, or perhaps to further document the force of the order of things, we need to note that reasserting the status quo was not a Gentile privilege. The case in question is the 1856 story "Jajin Kidush, oder falsche Beschuldigung" [Jajin Kidush, or a False Accusation by the Bohemian Jewish author Georg Leopold Weisel (1804-1873). In the foreground of the main plot is Salomo, a wealthy member of the Prague Jewish community, who plans to marry his daughter Dina to the son of another wealthy Prague Jewish merchant. The action is situated in the fourteenth-century Kingdom of Bohemia, which at the time is experiencing unrest fueled by church robberies allegedly organized by Jews. And, indeed, it turns out that Dina's groom is participating in these thefts. As a consequence of this revelation, Salomo, the father, withdraws the marriage contract, which makes his daughter happy, since she had actually been in love with Leon, a much-liked physician at the court. However, although her arranged groom has been proven a criminal and the marriage contract voided, her marriage with Leon cannot proceed since Dina is Jewish and Leon Gentile. This is at least what we read until the final paragraphs, in which Leon reveals his true identity - he is actually Jewish. The story has a happy ending, with nothing standing in the way of a marriage of two Jews.

Weisel's story presents a familiar triangle of a Jewish father, a Jewish daughter and a bona fide Gentile courtier. At the same time, the story also qualifies as a happyending tragedy in the sense we have seen in Klicpera. As such, it deserves more than a mention. As I have just claimed that "happy-ending tragedies" confirm the order of things in a heavy-handed, essentialist manner, we must for the sake of consistency conclude that Weisel provides a happy reassertion of the order of things, too, this time, of course, the Jewish order of things. The *Sippurim* collection in which the story appeared in 1856 was a Jewish literary project and had mainly Jewish readership. Obviously, Weisel's readership might have been happy about the outcome, but Weisel did not mind playing with the idea of transgression, provided the dividing line was eventually reasserted.

# 3. CONTEXTS

The above analyses should not be seen as a mechanical exercise that merely produces a new taxonomy of characters and texts. Among the more interesting results is the division of labor between male and female Jewish characters within the discourse JINDŘICH TOMAN 37

about Jews. Given this diversification, the consumer can now invest empathy into Jews by focusing on women rather than on men. Or, in other words, he can be a philosemite and antisemite at the same time. This is possible because in these narratives women largely lack prejudicial anti-Jewish labels, while males may well continue to preserve such labels. This division of labor represents a change vis-à-vis the previous representation of Jews that typically did not work with female protagonists but focused on the farcical figure of the male Jew.

However, in a world in which Jews still counted as a segregated group, the relative acceptance of a female Jewish character required taking some license. One such instance, the image of *la belle Juive*, has been discussed in the literature extensively (Fournier 2011, Krobb 1993, Sicher 2017, and many more). The image can display qualities that range from simple sexualization to standard Orientalization. Other characteristics can be added, such as compassion-evoking victimization. The latter is in consonance with, and in this sense licensed by, images of the victimization of innocent Gentile females, as seen in such eighteenth-century works as Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* or Marquis de Sade's *Justine*, in which violation of innocence and purity must be seen against the backdrop of normative Christian values.

Other licenses can be added within the framework of Christian values as well. Compare, for instance, licensing by way of the exemption granted to Jewish women when it comes to "inherent" Jewish guilt. Pacing through Giudecca in Venice, Chateaubriand concluded that in "that race" women were more beautiful than men and offered an explanation linking femininity to compassion. In contrast to Jewish men, who killed Jesus, Jewish women were compassionate, hence capable of caring for Jesus. As if responding to Chateaubriand, the Czech poet Vincenc Furch (1817–1864) wrote a poem based on this gendered division of labor in 1842, arguing that unlike Jewish men, Jewish women, whom he calls "fine daughters of Jerusalem," "evening stars" and "angels of consolation," were not only exempted from eternal guilt, but actually received beauty as a reward:

Jen nad Židami vyřekl Kletbu Pán, nad Židovkami Požehnání jest vyslovil: A co zástavu milosti Jim ponechal mír duše A východní krásu rájskou.

(Furch 1842: 33; original emphasis)

[The Lord cursed only Jewish men, Over Jewish women he pronounced His blessing. And as a promise of grace He gave them peace of the soul And Eastern paradisiac beauty.]

<sup>7 &</sup>quot;Les femmes de la Judée curent au Sauveur, l'aimèrent, le suivirent, l'assistèrent de leur bien, le soulagèrent dans ses afflictions" (Chateaubriand pace Savy 2010: 106).

It is not clear whether Chateaubriand and Furch represented a broadly cultivated Christian doctrine, but for our purposes this line is significant in that, by replacing antisemitic othering with Christian values, it grants license to identify with Jewish women.

The taxonomy of "tragedies" proposed above invites consideration of their narrative regime. While not all of our texts should be considered pulp literature, their common denominator is what might be called a "consuming" narrative regime. So far, I have labeled our material as tragedies, but "melodrama" might be more suitable in most cases, the assumption being that melodramas are not simply tragedies but, following Peter Brooks, narratives based on:

indulgence in strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking peripety. (Brooks 1976: 11f.)

Indeed, our pieces are "consuming" in that they are almost always built on simple polarization, extreme situations, plotting and villainy, all this heavily enriched by elements from the inventory of tropes and motifs from the *Schauerromantik*, such as court sessions in secret cellars, escapes to monasteries, revelations of true identity and the like. This inventory makes them different from what is arguably an important element in the genealogy of victimization that uses the father-daughter-courtier triad, namely Lessing's tragedy *Emilia Galotti*.§

Significantly, as a form of entertainment, melodramas generated affective communities and gave license to a preoccupation with Jews. In doing so, they were both reflexive and projective. On the one hand, they reflected social issues while, on the other hand, their language, compositional devices and motifs were projecting a specific image of Jews, one that was very different from that seen in the farcical pieces. Jonathan Hess has argued that melodrama represented "a site where Jews and non-Jews came together to forge an affective community predicated on a liberal identification with Jewish suffering" (Hess 2015: 32). Specifically, in his analysis of *Deborah* (1849), a blockbuster play by the Austrian Jewish author Salomon Hermann Mosenthal (1821–1877), Hess argues that reactions to this play provide a unique glimpse into the intricate relation in popular culture of philosemitism and liberal imagination: "[T]heater audiences around the world took enormous pleasure in witnessing the sufferings of Mosenthal's Jewess, well aware that they were attending a play that sought to convince its audiences to render such suffering a thing of the past" (ibid., 32).

Applying this perspective, especially the liberal line, to our material is not always possible, though "happy-ending tragedies" such as Klicpera's *The Israelite Woman* argu-

Audiences of this period would be familiar with G. E. Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* (1772), or one of its numerous adaptations, which has all the elements of the late eighteenth-century fascination with court intrigue and is, ultimately, a middle-class critique of the aristocratic world of privileges. In *Emilia Galotti*, a prince, a ruthless sexual adventurer, targets Emilia, a woman of bourgeois background, but Emilia is unwilling to follow his advances and decides to commit suicide. In the very last moment, however, her father, Odoardo Galotti, grabs Emilia's dagger and does the deed of honor. The similarity to Jewish fathers stabbing their compromised daughters to death is obvious.

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ably obliterate the liberal line. Prague audiences may well have understood this play as one about the rescue of a Christian woman from "Jewish hands." Similarly, Weisel's story adapts the rescue perspective for the Jewish reader. In this sense, happy-end tragedies were assertions of order rather than liberal statements. Neither Klicpera nor Weisel were willing to negotiate much in terms of traditional loyalties. Nonetheless, although they eventually voted for outcomes that asserted the order, they were ready to entertain oneself with shocking transgressive options. The form of the melodrama provided an adequate frame.

Finally, it is also possible to contextualize our material vis-à-vis specific social issues. Although our pieces are mostly not about marriage, it is plausible to assume that audiences receiving them were capable of seeing in works about transgressive relationships an echo of discussions about interconfessional marriage. The issue had a visible presence, especially in Germany, as witnessed by spectacular cases such as the marriage of Rahel Levin, which required her to convert to Christianity in order to marry a Christian (cf. Lezzi 2013). It is forgotten, though, that the bulk of discussion and unrest was not really about German-Jewish intermarriage but about interconfessional marriage between Roman Catholics and Protestants. German 1830s were marked by the so-called Cologne Church Upheavals (Kölner Kirchenstreit), a series of disputes and rebellious events revolving around Catholic-Protestant interconfessional marriage. Although a largely German phenomenon, this conflict was not entirely unknown in the Habsburg monarchy.

In sum, narratives of Gentile-Jewish romantic transgressions open a number of perspectives, whether literary or social, on the representation of Jews in nineteenth-century literature from Bohemia, whether Czech or German. They indicate their authors' readiness to shock and entertain with transgression, mostly in order to reassert the status quo. A variety of licenses were necessary, while the melodramatic regime made the game with transgression possible.

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