

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI

A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road Ann Arbor MI 48106-1346 USA
313 761-4700 800 521-0600

Order Number 9521249

Shakespeare on the American Yiddish stage

Berkowitz, Joel Baruch, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1995

Copyright ©1995 by Berkowitz, Joel Baruch. All rights reserved.

U·M·I

300 N. Zeeb Rd.
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

SHAKESPEARE ON THE AMERICAN YIDDISH STAGE

by

JOEL BERKOWITZ

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1995

© 1995

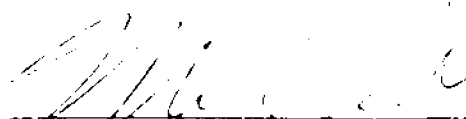
JOEL BERKOWITZ

All Rights Reserved

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

November 17, 1994

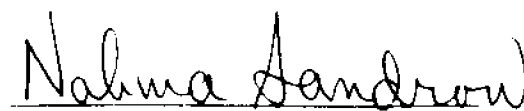
Date

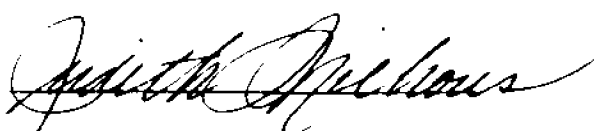

Chair of Examining Committee

November 17, 1994

Date


Executive Officer
Marvin Carlson


Nabima Sandrow


Judith Milhaus

Supervisory Committee

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A number of individuals and institutions have helped make this study possible. I first wish to thank three sources of funding: the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture; the National Foundation for Jewish Culture; and the Roberts Fellowship, established by Professor Vera M. Roberts and granted by the Ph.D. Program in Theatre at the City University of New York Graduate Center.

This research would not have been possible without the resources offered by several libraries and archives. Dr. Peggy Pearlstein of the Hebraic Section at the Library of Congress helped me find several play scripts. The staff members at two divisions of the New York Public Library--the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at Lincoln Center and the Jewish Division--were always courteous and helpful. Finally, Dina Abramowicz, Zachary Baker, and Marek Web of the YIVO Institute have shared with me their impressive knowledge of Yiddish sources.

I have been blessed with a number of careful readers of parts or all of the dissertation in progress. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett provided valuable criticism of an early draft of Chapter 2. My friend Nina Warnke has offered countless insights, both in response to specific sections of the dissertation and during more general discussions of Yiddish theatre. The members of my "shadow committee," Ed Dee, John Istel, and Paul Nadler, connoisseurs of fine pizza

all, have pushed me to refine both my thinking and my writing, and their encouragement has been priceless. Finally, I cannot imagine a more congenial and rewarding relationship with a dissertation committee, and the insights of Walter Meserve, Judith Milhous, Nahma Sandrow, and my adviser, Marvin Carlson, have an immeasurable impact on this thesis. I acknowledge this fact here rather than burden the work with another ten pages of endnotes.

Most of all, I thank my family for their love and support: my siblings, Adam, Dana, and David, and most of all my parents, Daniel and Judith Berkowitz.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
I. The Yiddish Context	15
II. Jacob Gordin's King and Queen Lear	51
III. Thomashefsky in Tights	101
IV. Shakespeare Judaized: The Second Wave	156
V. In Bernhardt's Footsteps: Bertha Kalish's Hamlet	203
VI. "A True Jewish Jew": Three Yiddish Shylocks	229
VII. Fading Out	272
Conclusion	297
Bibliography	316

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. "A Moving Picture" (Jacob Adler as the "Jewish King Lear")	93
2. Keni Liptzin vs. Esther-Rokhl Kaminska as Mirele Efros	94
3. Yiddish tribute to Edwin Booth	119
4. Jacob Adler watching Rudolf Schildkraut's Shylock	245
5. "The Best Shakespeare in the Market"	274
6. Shakespeare and Peretz	276
7. "In Paradise" (Shakespeare and Peretz in Heaven)	278
8. "If Shakespeare Had to Sell a Play Today"	279

INTRODUCTION

The story of Shakespeare in Yiddish is in many respects that of modern Yiddish literature itself. Though not without its comic, pathetic, and even grotesque features, it is essentially a tragic story, and one which, like great tragic drama, transmutes its burden of pain into a kind of joy. Modern Yiddish literature and its sister, the modern Yiddish stage, were born in obloquy and shame, struggled heroically to discover their own true voices, and, having learned to sing confidently in almost every register, the world finally listening with respect, were virtually silenced by the Nazi and Stalinist Molochs.

--Leonard Prager, "Shakespeare in Yiddish"¹

The ways in which Yiddish playwrights and actors in the United States re-imagined Shakespeare's plays had far-reaching implications for the American Yiddish theatre. Traditionalists might scoff at the changes made in Shakespeare's plots and characters for presentation to Yiddish audiences, as a Cleveland journalist suggested in 1903: "Some of the changes which it has been found necessary to make in the dramas are little short of startling and might vex the soul of a lover of the Bard of Avon."² Yet since Yiddish adaptors were far more concerned with pleasing a mass audience than with appeasing the occasional purist, their Shakespearean adaptations serve as a prism through which to study the Yiddish theatre culture. In the words of Esther Cloudman Dunn,

Ben Jonson wrote more truly than he knew when he described Shakespeare as 'not for an Age but for all time.' He will survive each separate time, inviolate and indestructible. But he yields, too, to the manipulation, the 'form and pressure' of each succeeding era, and, in the process turns himself into the most delicate barometer of social and cultural history.³

Tracing Shakespeare's adaptation into Yiddish via the premieres of professional Yiddish productions of his plays in the United States provides a means of measuring developments in the audience expectations, theatrical conditions, aesthetics, and ideologies of the American Yiddish theatre.

In the mid-1880s, just a few years after the first professional performance of a Yiddish play in the United States, Shakespeare began making his way into the American Yiddish repertoire. His plays enjoyed a boom in the early 1890s, and became a staple in the Yiddish theatre from that point through the 1940s--the half-century that constituted the most vital period of the American Yiddish theatre. Some Yiddish versions of Shakespeare's plays would vanish quickly from the stage and from audiences' memories; others would find a lasting place in the repertoire. And as in other cultures, Shakespeare would come to serve as a metonym for great artistry. In the Yiddish theatre culture, however, this lofty status was commingled with suspicion, for Jewish theatre-goers have never quite figured out what to make of Shylock, the most famous Jew in literature outside the Bible.

The writers who brought Shakespeare's plays to the Yiddish stage tended not to concern themselves with the sanctity of the "original" text. In fact, many of them made their translations and adaptations from other translations, usually in Russian or German. Even when they followed the general flow of the action and kept the same settings, they

often cut entire scenes and eliminated or consolidated roles, just as many other adaptors of Shakespeare from the English Restoration to the twentieth century have done.

Many Yiddish adaptations moved far from their sources, transplanting them to contemporary Jewish environments in Eastern Europe or the United States, and making characters and events specifically Jewish. Isidore Zolatarevsky provided one of the most notable examples in this vein with his 1899 work Der yeshiva bokher [The Yeshiva Boy]--Hamlet transplanted into Jewish soil. American journalist and theatre historian Hutchins Hapgood outlined this version as follows:

In the Yiddish play the uncle is a rabbi in a small village in Russia. He did not poison Hamlet's father but broke the latter's heart by wooing and winning his queen. Hamlet is off somewhere getting educated as a rabbi. While he is gone his father dies. Six weeks afterwards he returns in the midst of the wedding feast, and turns the feast into a funeral. . . . The wicked rabbi conspires against Hamlet, trying to make him out a nihilist. The plot is discovered and the wicked rabbi is sent to Siberia. The last act is the graveyard scene. Ophelia is brought in on the bier. Hamlet mourns by her side and is married, according to the Jewish custom, to the dead woman. Then he dies of a broken heart.⁴

This study examines Zolatarevsky's adaptation and other "Judaized" re-imaginings of Shakespeare's plays in an attempt to show what each of them, as well as their cumulative weight, tell us about the Yiddish theatre culture in the United States. Such an analysis must be made in the context of the ever-changing status of Shakespeare and his plays in the American Yiddish theatre culture, which manifests itself in such evidence as advertisements, published translations of

Shakespeare's plays, and articles about his life and work.

The mere resemblance of any Yiddish work to a Shakespeare play does not suffice to illustrate what Shakespeare meant to the American Yiddish theatre culture. After all, two star-crossed lovers do not a Romeo and Juliet make, nor a jealous husband an Othello. This study focuses on Yiddish plays that, in one way or another, were advertised or otherwise publicly perceived at the time they premiered as deriving from Shakespeare. These parameters embrace four categories: first and most obvious, adaptations or translations that retain the original title or a direct translation thereof; second, works whose altered titles give some obvious hint of a Shakespearean source (the most conspicuous examples being the many adaptations with the name Shylock in the title); third, works whose main titles betray no hint of Shakespeare, but which advertise Shakespearean pedigrees in a subtitle or on the title page (e.g. Kobrin's The Blind Musician, or, The Jewish Othello); and finally, plays that were recognized and written about during the time of their premiere as deriving from a Shakespearean source even if they were not advertised as such. These four categories encompass the various ways in which American Yiddish theatre audiences could have perceived Yiddish productions as relating to Shakespeare.

Audience perception sometimes defines what is considered Yiddish theatre as well, for that category stretches beyond productions in which all or even most of the characters speak

Yiddish. First of all, stage Yiddish in the first decades of the professional Yiddish often bore little resemblance to everyday, spoken Yiddish, since Yiddish playwrights at the time tended to write in a stiffly elevated style.⁵ However, such linguistic curiosities still do not fully account for the variety of stage language in the Yiddish theatre, where German Jewish guest stars such as Morris Morrison and Rudolf Schildkraut sometimes performed their roles in German with the supporting cast responding in Yiddish. This study also examines what happens when Yiddish Shakespeare travels to non-Yiddish theatres, as when Jacob Adler played Shylock in Yiddish, accompanied by an English-speaking supporting cast, in 1903 and 1905.

While landmark productions of Shakespeare in Yiddish were mounted in Europe by some of the world's greatest Yiddish actors, such as Avrom Morevski in Poland (in The Tempest, 1938) and Solomon Mikhoels in Russia (as Lear, 1935), the present study focuses on American Yiddish adaptations and thus confines itself to a distinct culture. The first audiences for the American Yiddish theatre consisted mostly of the immigrants who flocked to this country in unprecedented numbers during the two decades after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. They came primarily from Russia, Poland, and Romania, where religious and governmental restrictions tended to set them apart from their non-Jewish countrymen. They emigrated to the United States, as have so

many other immigrants before and since, seeking religious freedom and economic opportunity. Many of the Jewish immigrants achieved both of these goals over the next couple of generations, but material comfort and a new-found exposure to secular education made each subsequent generation more assimilated into American life. Ironically, while the horrors of persecution would all but eradicate European Yiddish culture by the end of World War II, freedom from persecution would yield similar results, culturally speaking, in the United States. Throughout the course of the American Yiddish theatre, the phenomenon of Shakespeare in Yiddish reflects the changing beliefs, desires, and expectations of American Yiddish theatre audiences.

The geography of studies of the American Yiddish theatre often recalls Sol Steinberg's famous map of the world for The New Yorker, a visual manifestation of the disproportionate influence New Yorkers tend to believe that their city has over the rest of the world. Part of why New York has loomed so large in the studies of the American Yiddish theatre is that so many of the authors have been native or transplanted New Yorkers: David Lifson, Nahma Sandrow, Marvin Saiger, and Zalmen Zylbercweig, to name but a few. Furthermore, the lion's share of American Yiddish newspapers have been published in New York.

However, any predisposition journalists and scholars may have had for their home town is not the only reason for New

York's dominance in such studies. While the Yiddish theatre in such cities as Philadelphia, Chicago, Baltimore, and Cleveland certainly deserves more attention,⁶ actors and playwrights tended to see New York as the Yiddish theatre mecca. In the Yiddish theatre, professional plays usually premiered in New York, moving out of town only after they had either established themselves or failed on the Bowery. As an actor in Cleveland reported in 1903, "We get most of our plays and translations from New York. After they have outlived their usefulness there we can purchase them for from \$25 to \$40 each."⁷

The topic of Shakespeare on the Yiddish stage--whether in New York or anywhere else--has attracted occasional scholarly attention, though never at greater length than in the half-dozen journal articles on different aspects of the subject.⁸ Besides these sources, Yiddish productions of Shakespeare attract sporadic mention in longer works, such as Lulla Adler Rosenfeld's biography of her grandfather Jacob P. Adler, or John Gross's recent book on Shylock.⁹ No full-length work on the topic has yet been undertaken, however; as Leonard Prager concluded in 1990, "The story of Shakespeare in Yiddish deserves a monograph."¹⁰

Since Yiddish theatre scholarship has barely been attempted in English, this study draws primarily on Yiddish sources, starting with manuscripts and published versions of Shakespeare plays rendered into Yiddish. Most of these can be

found in two New York City collections: the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library. YIVO's Perlmutter Collection and play collection contain thousands of scripts, and other manuscript versions of Shakespeare plays can be found in the personal papers of playwrights, actors, and critics of the Yiddish theatre. The Jewish Division houses the Thomashefsky Collection, which contains dozens of scripts from the American Yiddish theatre. These collections hold important auxiliary material as well, such as musical scores, letters, production photographs, and broadsides. Additional unpublished materials can be found in other important theatre collections, such as the Billy Rose Collection at the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, Harvard University, and the Library of Congress.

The memoirs of Yiddish actors and other theatre personnel provide additional first-hand accounts of a number of productions of Shakespeare in Yiddish. Such accounts are supplemented by secondary Yiddish sources. The seminal works are the second of B. Gorin's two volumes on the history of Yiddish theatre, which provides useful criticism as well as some wonderful anecdotal material; and Zalmen Zylbercweig's six-volume lexicon of the Yiddish theatre, which contains generally reliable and detailed accounts of specific productions.¹¹

The Yiddish press fuels this study in many ways. Yiddish newspapers began publication in the United States on a regular

basis during the 1880s, the same decade that witnessed the first American productions of Yiddish theatre. Once both of these institutions established themselves as major cultural institutions, their destinies became closely intertwined, and much of Yiddish theatre's legacy has been preserved in the amber of Yiddish journalism. The most obvious feature of the newspapers in regard to this study is the theatre review, which appeared in the Yiddish press haphazardly until the turn of the century, and more steadily after that.¹²

While reviews provide crucial evidence, many other clues to the nature of Yiddish theatre are scattered throughout other pages of the Yiddish newspapers. Shakespeare and his plays were frequently discussed in a wide variety of articles: plot synopses, satirical sketches, articles on world theatre history, and pieces dealing with issues deriving from the plays. Such articles shed light on the development of the status of Shakespeare as a source of interest in the Yiddish culture and constitute a significant part of the network of influences that brought Shakespeare's name into the Yiddish theatrical vocabulary.

Crucial information about the theatre also appears on the advertising pages of the newspapers. A careful investigation of theatre ads from week to week indicates the premiere dates of Yiddish plays--information that has not been compiled in a single chronology except for the first ten years of Yiddish theatre in New York.¹³ While going through the ads, I have

noted every time that an adaptation of Shakespeare play has run in New York (the only city in which Yiddish newspapers appeared on a regular basis throughout the years covered by this study). This provides a record of the frequency of the productions of such plays. While not every peak and valley in the history of such productions indicates a sea change, a major upward or downward trend may signal an important development; such a record helps provide an overview and leads one to ask why the trends occurred when they did.

Advertisements also offer subtle and not-so-subtle clues to a variety of other information about the Yiddish theatre. Companies changed theatres frequently, and upon moving into a new one, might run an ad for a few weeks describing the new house or providing details about the renovations, as in a 1901 ad heralding the re-opening of a theatre: "The beautiful People's Theatre is now being equipped with new ELECTRIC FANS."¹⁴ Similar announcements provide other vital details, including the years and cost of a lease, the names of new managers, and other information relevant to the opening of a new theatre.

Finally, the advertising rhetoric dictating how Shakespeare's plays were billed in the Yiddish press deserves close attention. Some plays were announced with great fanfare, while others got no special treatment beyond the usual couple of lines that accompanied the production of any play. Both sides of that coin tell a story, as does the issue

of whether a play was billed as being a Shakespeare adaptation at all. Advertising also evidences a direct line of communication between entrepreneur and potential audience in which the former tries to send just the right message to bring the latter into the theatre. An ad thus exhibits the businessman's best bet as to what the customer might be thinking: speculation that deserves attention from the historian trying to analyze practices in effect decades earlier.

Shakespeare was incorporated into the American Yiddish theatre largely through the efforts of a number of central personalities, around whom this study is organized.¹⁵ Chapter 1 summarizes major developments in the Yiddish theatre before Shakespeare's introduction to the culture and analyzes some of the first, isolated instances of the co-opting of Shakespeare into the American Yiddish theatre. Chapter 2 examines playwright Jacob Gordin's two adaptations of King Lear, placing them in the context of Gordin's aesthetics and ideology. Chapters 3 and 4 both focus on the Shakespearean career of actor/manager Boris Thomashefsky; Chapter 3 deals with the translations in which he performed, while Chapter 4 treats the Judaized Shakespearean adaptations that featured him. Chapter 5 explores the cultural significance of a 1901 New York production of Hamlet starring Bertha Kalish in the title role. The production attracted the attention of several non-Yiddish-speaking critics and audiences, who would come to

the Yiddish theatre in increasing numbers in subsequent decades. Chapter 6 examines three prominent Shylocks: Jacob Adler, Rudolph Schildkraut, and Maurice Schwartz. Chapter 7 features a production of Othello produced by Maurice Schwartz and his Yiddish Art Theatre in 1929, as well as other self-consciously "high-art" American Yiddish manifestations of the Shakespeare phenomenon: scholarly studies and treatments of the Shakespeare tercentenary in 1916 and the quadricentennial in 1964. The Conclusion attempts to synthesize what Shakespeare has meant to Yiddish theatre in the United States.

Both the Yiddish language and the Yiddish theatre were brought to the United States by the immigrants who came from Eastern Europe in large numbers beginning in the 1880s. In order to understand the vibrant theatrical culture they created in America, one must figuratively undertake their transcontinental voyage in reverse and examine the development of the Yiddish theatre in Europe.

NOTES

1. Leonard Prager, "Shakespeare in Yiddish," Shakespeare Quarterly 19 (1968), 149.
2. C. W. Sanders, "Shakespeare in Yiddish," Cleveland Plain Dealer Sunday Magazine, 25 January 1903, 5.
3. Esther Cloudman Dunn, Shakespeare in America (1939; reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968), 274.
4. Hutchins Hapgood, The Spirit of the Ghetto (1902; reprint, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 127.
5. See the discussion of this dialect, daytshmerish, in Chapter 1.
6. The only full-length study devoted entirely to Yiddish theatre in an American city besides New York is James Miller's The Detroit Yiddish Theatre (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967).
7. Sanders, "Shakespeare in Yiddish," 5.
8. See Iska Alter, "When the Audience Called 'Author! Author!': Shakespeare on New York's Yiddish Stage," Theatre History Studies 10 (1990), 141-62; Adah Boraisha-Fogel, "Shakespeare Translations in Yiddish," Jewish Book Annual 14 (1956-57), 32-37; Dahlia Kaufman, "The First Yiddish Translation of Julius Caesar, in The Field of Yiddish, 5th Collection, ed. David Goldberg (YIVO and Northwestern University Press, 1993), 219-242; Leonard Prager, "Of Parents and Children: Jacob Gordin's The Jewish King Lear," American Quarterly 18 (1966), 506-16; and Prager, "Shakespeare in Yiddish."
9. Lulla Adler Rosenfeld, Bright Star of Exile (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1977); John Gross, Shylock: A Legend and its Legacy (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).
10. Prager, Yiddish Culture in Britain (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1990), 264.
11. B. Gorin, Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater (New York: Max N. Mayzel, 1923); Zalmen Zylbercweig, Leksikon fun yidishn teater, (New York and Mexico City, 1931-1970).
12. See Charles A. Madison, Jewish Publishing in America (New York, Sanhedrin Press, 1976).
13. Appendix C in Seiger, 527-63.
14. Dos abend blat, 1 August 1901.

15. For a comparable arrangement, see Charles Shattuck's two-volume study, Shakespeare on the American Stage (Washington, D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1976 and 1987).

CHAPTER 1

THE YIDDISH CONTEXT

Before the Yiddish theatre discovered Shakespeare, it was busy developing traditions of its own that would influence the way in which Shakespeare's plays would be adapted. In 1876, in the city of Jassy, Romania, Avrom Goldfadn (1840-1908) began the work that would earn him the title of "Father of the Yiddish theatre." Actually, Yiddish theatre had existed for hundreds of years in the form of the purimshpil: a sketch, usually based on Biblical themes, performed on the holiday of Purim in the homes of wealthy members of the Jewish community. However, the purimshpil was by and large an amateur, seasonal affair.¹

Another amateur forerunner to Goldfadn's work was the Haskole [Jewish Enlightenment] drama performed by university students in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Haskole was a response to the power of Jewish orthodoxy, and sought to infuse Judaism with Western learning. Haskole drama thus emphasized mankind's earthly responsibilities over his religious ones. Goldfadn played the title role (a woman) in one such play, Shloyme Ettinger's Serkele (ca. 1830), at the Zhitomir Rabbinical Academy in 1862.²

Professional antecedents to Goldfadn took two forms: the badkhn and the Broder singer. The primary function of the badkhn, or wedding jester, was to make the wedding guests merry, a goal he achieved in part through bawdy rhymes and

lewd songs, which he often composed impromptu. He frequently served as master of ceremonies as well, and sometimes even assumed duties traditionally assigned to the rabbi, such as reminding the bride of her marital responsibilities.³

The Broder singers, as Nahma Sandrow points out, "were essentially secular badkhanim, who appeared at the lively wine gardens and inns which were proliferating in Eastern Europe, instead of only in respectable Jewish households."⁴ In the mid-1870s, Goldfadn visited Shimen Mark's Green Tree café in Jassy, where a Broder singer named Israel Grodner was performing an act that included some Goldfadn songs. Goldfadn was invited to perform as well, but he made an unfortunate choice: a solemn poetry recitation. The crowd's initial silence turned to hissing when he continued, and they settled down only when Grodner reappeared to cajole them with comic stories and songs. As Sandrow concludes, "It was an object lesson for Goldfadn, who kept his public's tastes in mind ever after."⁵ It also anticipated a common scenario in the Yiddish theatre from Goldfadn on; here was a powerful, vocal audience that dictated the material on the program, chasing away a writer/performer who miscalculated their expectations, and finding satisfaction in a popular star entertainer with a better understanding of their tastes. The lively dialectic between artists and audiences would often have a strong influence on the way in which Shakespeare's plays were adapted into Yiddish.

Fortunately, Goldfadn's initial defeat did not seem to discourage him, but simply focused his attention on formulae for success with such audiences. He assembled a professional theatre company, and his operettas soon earned him fame in Romania, Poland, and Russia. While the first years of the Yiddish theatre have been chronicled elsewhere,⁶ a few of the salient features of this era merit discussion here, for they have an important bearing on the adaptation of Shakespeare's plays for Yiddish stages in the United States.

Like the Jewish people as a whole for much of their history, the early Yiddish actors tended to be nomads. While most actors lead peripatetic lives, the first professional Yiddish actors had to travel for political as well as professional reasons. Tsar Alexander III forced them off the stage and into exile by signing the so-called May Laws of 1882. Within less than a decade, the center of world Yiddish theatre shifted with the westward flow of the Eastern European Jewish masses, from cities like Lemberg and Odessa, to London, and finally to New York. Meanwhile, a great deal of Yiddish theatrical activity continued in Europe well into the twentieth century. American Yiddish stars sometimes revisited their European roots by touring the capitals of European Jewry for months at a time, and such managers as Boris Thomashefsky and Jacob Adler took numerous summer trips across the Atlantic to recruit new stars for their theatres. Throughout their wanderings, actors and playwrights had to be chameleon-like in

adapting to new surroundings, customs, and languages. They succeeded to a remarkable degree, and helped their audiences to acculturate as well.

Yiddish actors and playwrights also tended to share a common background: a traditional Jewish education. Many of these figures--particularly the men, for whom such education was emphasized--were well versed in Hebrew, the Bible, and Biblical commentary, however far away from traditional Judaism they might have drifted as adults. During the first decades of Yiddish theatre, even non-religious Jews had at least some familiarity with Jewish religion, history, customs, and traditions, and this common source of knowledge emerges on almost every page of every Yiddish play, whether in plot, character, setting, allusion, or imagery. Shakespeare's Christian world view did not immunize the adaptation of his plays from this influence any more than his Western stage practice prevents his plays from being performed by Kabuki troupes. Once a Yiddish playwright made the choice to adapt a Shakespearean play--a choice that was made by different playwrights for many different reasons--it was only natural for the original to be recast, to a greater or lesser degree, in Jewish terms.

The religious upbringing of Yiddish theatre personnel directly affected the music of the Yiddish theatre as well; as musicologist Mark Slobin observes, the pioneers of the Yiddish theatre "began life as thinkers and teachers, not clowns and

minstrels. The leading musical figures of the movement were all trained in the synagogues as upholders of liturgical music, not as street singers."⁷ Enormously popular stars such as Sigmund Feinman, Boris Thomashefsky, and Sigmund Mogulesco--the latter two also prolific theatre composers--all received their first musical training as neshovrerim, or cantors' apprentices. A significant part of their musical imagination had its roots in the synagogue, where they performed in choirs. Synagogues provided the first stages for such performers, and the professional Yiddish theatre would retain much of the ritual flavor of its genesis.

Yiddish theatre was also a family affair, as this passage from Sandrow illustrates:

The names of some of the most important actresses indicate their offstage romances. Sophia (or Sara) Goldstein, the very first actress, left Sakher Goldstein and married another actor, to become Sophie (sometimes Sophia) Karp. Bessie Thomashefsky was Boris's wife. Bina Abramovitch married the actor Max Abramovitch. Dina Stettin became Dina Adler when she married Jacob P. Adler. When Adler left her for Sara, wife of the actor Heine-Haimovitch, Sara Heine-Haimovitch became Sara Adler. Dina Stettin Adler married the portly baritone star Sigmund Feinman and took the stage name Dina Feinman.⁸

These marriages often produced offspring who would shine on the Yiddish stage and beyond; Harry Thomashefsky and Celia, Stella, and Luther Adler were all born into theatrical families, and would gain theatrical fame in their own right.

Aside from blood ties, tightly knit theatre companies had their own family dynamics, with a mother and father, faithful and wayward children, unbreakable ties, and irreconcilable

differences. In such a small and intimate theatrical community, where actors and playwrights often moved in mid-season from one theatre to its rival down the road or across the street, everyone knew everyone else's business, and did their utmost to seize it for themselves. This rivalry meant that once a Yiddish Shakespearean repertoire developed, a Shakespeare production at Theatre A often triggered a competing one at Theatre B--occasionally even the same play at the same time.

European and American theatres, which tended to revolve around star actor/managers in the first half of the nineteenth century, saw a great deal of such competition. In the tightly knit Yiddish theatre, rivalries could get very personal. The Yiddish press devoted numerous articles to the phenomenon of patriotn [fans] of Yiddish stars, and the extremes to which their ardor sometimes carried them. Fortunately, their zeal never resulted in anything as deadly as the infamous Astor Place Riot of 1849, the bloody culmination of years of squabbling between the fans of American actor Edwin Forrest and his English colleague William Macready. In the Yiddish theatre, a choice of one actor's interpretation of a character as opposed to another's was usually based not on any underlying ideology, but simply on the preference for one star's personality or theatrical style.

As powerful as Yiddish actors would eventually become, the first decade of Yiddish theatre in the United States

(1882-1892) saw even the most famous actors deferring to two star playwrights, "Professor" Moyshe Hurwitz (1844-1910) and Joseph Lateiner (1853-1935), who alternated in the position of resident dramatist at the Romania Opera House and the Windsor Theatre, located across the street from each other on New York's Bowery.⁹ Both writers cranked out play after slapdash play, with a song here, a dance there, a tearful scene followed by a farcical one, and every convoluted turn of the plot bumping along towards the finale. The plays often ended happily, but the so-called "historical operas," for all their poetic license, could not always avoid a catastrophic dénouement.

The actors and managers who worked with Hurwitz and Lateiner defended their house playwrights with gusto. Leon Kobrin (1872-1946), who would eventually become one of the most prominent Yiddish playwrights of his generation, had trouble sparking interest in his first play when he brought it to the Windsor Theatre, where Hurwitz reigned as house playwright. When Kobrin confronted the manager after being all but ignored, the manager responded, "Here we don't perform plays by yolds," using the theatre lingo for an inexperienced playwright. The prejudice against newcomers created a Catch-22: in order to become an experienced playwright, one had to have prior experience as a playwright. When the yold did not go away after a simple dismissal, the actors relished the chance to humiliate him utterly and elaborately. One of many

methods of doing so was for Hurwitz's company to express interest in a play, but to confess that they were scared to death of their playwright, and any other writer would have to come to them secretly to read his play for them. After sufficiently establishing the fear Hurwitz inspired in his underlings, the company would make an appointment for the would-be playwright to read his new play to them, a common practice at the time. Once the playwright had the feigned interest of the actors gathered around him, another actor would start stomping towards them from backstage, prompting the onstage actors to look at each other with panic-stricken expressions and cry, "the Professor is coming!" And they all headed for the nearest exit, their performance teaching their audience of one that he should find another way of making a living.¹⁰

The Lateiner/Hurwitz stranglehold during the 1880s was so powerful that even Avrom Goldfadn could not get his new plays produced in New York, though several of his earlier works had become staples in the Yiddish theatre diet. Marvin Seiger provides this explanation for the duration of the monopoly:

As a carryover from the early Goldfadn period in Roumania and Russia, the company dramatist became the focal point of importance in a troupe. It was he who supplied the new repertory. Actors were dependent on him for survival, and they displayed their appreciation by protecting him from other writers who dared to challenge his supremacy. Such a situation explains why new dramatists had a difficult time getting their plays into production during the early seasons. Unless a playwright received the support of either Hurwitz or Lateiner, he had no opportunity to sell his work to a troupe.¹¹

But Lateiner's and Hurwitz's grip slowly began to weaken in the late 1880s, with the occasional production of works by such playwrights as Rudolph Marks, Reuben Weissman, Nakhum Meyer ("Shomer") Shaykevitsh, and Moyshe Zeifert. Finally, in the 1890-91 season, works by new playwrights far outnumbered plays by Lateiner and Hurwitz in the New York theatres.¹²

The monopoly disintegrated for good after 6 March 1891, when Jacob P. Adler turned the mounting battle for audiences into a three-way war by opening the Union Theatre, formerly known as Poole's Theatre, in Astor Place.¹³ The opening heightened the need for new plays and quickened the pace at which playwrights had to provide them. Theatre historian Bernard Gorin describes how this phenomenon worked: "A writer who wanted to write for the stage had to be able to write plays at the drop of a hat. The writer in the new land had to stick to the American principle of 'hurry up'; he who did not understand how to do this was out of a job."¹⁴ The repertoire of Western dramatic literature sped up the output of plays much as the sewing machine accelerated the production of pants, and the 1890s consequently saw a flood of translations from the classics--especially Shakespeare, Goethe, and Schiller--and from contemporary European drama.

In an 1897 essay, playwright Moyshe Zeifert (1851-1922) poked fun at the pretensions of the Yiddish theatre to the classical repertoire--a phenomenon in which Zeifert himself played no small role:

But all of a sudden a horrible plague broke out in the theatre world, and the plague trampled on everything that had up to then been planted with such energy and at such expense. This plague was called the Plague of the Classics. Our Yiddish actors, who went to sleep one night feeling fresh and healthy in every limb, woke up the next morning deathly ill. They had all suddenly caught Classical Influenza. They were all feverish, and fever made them babble things so wild that they would have been ashamed even to think them when healthy. 'We are stars!'--they fantasized in the grip of the fever--'and because we are stars, the Yiddish repertoire is worthless! Enough of making fools of ourselves! From now on we will adopt Shakespeare, Schiller, Goethe, even Grillparzer! 'Moyshe' [i.e. the Yiddish audience] should see who we are and what we can do! That which Salvini, Ludwig Barnay, Adolph Sonnenthal, Possart, Edwin Booth, Joseph Kainz, Sarah Bernhardt, Eleanora Duse and Fanny Davenport can do, we can do as well! We can certainly do that!!!'

And for such an influenza, there was nothing any doctor could do!

The first classical writer whose molars were extracted was poor William Shakespeare. Jacob Adler had dredged up a fatally stilted translation of Othello, naturally in hotsy-totsy language, and presented it. He himself played the Moor Othello, S. Feinman butchered the role of Iago, and Desdemissing was played by Madam Adler.

The audience went to see 'Shakespeare,' paid good money, didn't understand a word and came out of the theatre with hands swollen from clapping bravos. 'We don't even know what's going on,' said one 'Moyshe' to another, 'but if Adler plays it, it's probably good!'¹⁵

Zeifert has suggested, albeit with tongue in cheek, several reasons why Shakespeare's plays began to appear on Yiddish stages, starting with the denigration of the Yiddish repertoire by the actors who performed it. During this time, Yiddish was often referred to as zhargon (jargon); according to literary critic Dan Miron,

Yiddish . . . was decidedly and vehemently rejected by almost all eighteenth- and nineteenth-century maskilim (proponents of the Enlightenment), including most of the important writers who used it for propagandistic as well as artistic purposes. It was generally regarded as a linguistic and cultural aberration; its speakers were

constantly referred to as "stammerers," and their speech was often compared to meaningless noises produced by animals.¹⁶

The very writers who helped establish Yiddish as a literary language often wrote in Yiddish reluctantly, as if it were the only medium available until the masses were ready for something more sophisticated.

This same ambivalence carried over to the stage. The stage language of choice for the early decades of professional Yiddish theatre was not Yiddish as anyone really spoke it, but a mishmash called daytshmerish, or Germanized Yiddish. Actor Boris Thomashefsky cites the following case as typical of the attitude toward language on the Yiddish stage in the 1880s and 1890s:

The actor Max Karp . . . from Romania, where German culture had a great influence on the educated classes, used to say: "Yiddish is not a language. The stage demands a more beautiful, nobler tongue, so we must refine Yiddish. We must educate the Yiddish public, and get it accustomed to speaking a more beautiful language."¹⁷

Yiddish actors borrowed both the linguistic and dramaturgic clothes of their European and American counterparts in order to enable the Yiddish theatre to stand on its own. No wonder, then, that Yiddish actors eyed their American, Italian, and German colleagues enviously until ultimately resolving to prove to their audiences--and themselves--that they could master the classics.

An 1897 essay by linguist Alexander Harkavy makes explicit the connection between Shakespeare and

respectability. Harkavy contributed a piece to the inaugural issue of the Yiddish theatre journal Di fraye yidishe folksbine entitled, "Is Yiddish a Language for Drama?" Harkavy rebuts several arguments that he says critics have raised in an attempt to show that Yiddish cannot sustain the drama. Skeptics, he says, have remarked that Yiddish is too young, too lacking in words to express the range and complexity of emotion and experience required for dramatic literature. He responds to this by pointing out that if a language needs a new word, it can either forge one from its own roots or borrow it from another language, especially Greek or Latin. After examining some of the implications of his claim, Harkavy provides a Yiddish translation of Hamlet's "To Be or Not to Be" soliloquy, and concludes:

This little piece of Shakespeare in Yiddish says more than any other evidence that Yiddish is a language for drama, that our mother tongue is a language for the stage--not just for simple dramas but also for sophisticated ones; let good writers get to work, and there will be no obstacle to what our language can do!¹⁸

A few pages earlier, the journal's editor, Joel Entin, established his publication's platform. Third in his list of six goals was to raise the level of the Yiddish theatre repertoire in order to give it the "character of a true literature."¹⁹ Entin enlisted Harkavy, the leading Yiddish linguist, to assure readers that Yiddish was sufficiently rich to attain such a character. In turn, Harkavy enlisted Shakespeare, the world's most respected playwright, to proclaim the suitability of Yiddish for drama. Res ipsa

loquitur: a Yiddish rendering of the most famous passage in dramatic literature speaks for itself.

Shakespeare could confer upon Yiddish actors a respectability akin to what Harkavy sought to gain for the Yiddish language. Like their counterparts in other cultures, Yiddish actors were often viewed as ruffians and miscreants, and they often saw Shakespeare as a useful agent in their quest for social and artistic legitimacy. They needed Shakespeare's plays to satisfy not only their own egos, but also two opposing populations within the Jewish community: orthodoxy and the intelligentsia.

The former group far outnumbered the latter as of 1887, when the first Yiddish adaptation of a Shakespeare play was produced in New York. Virtually every Yiddish actor who wrote about that period tells stories of potential obstacles to their theatrical activity in the form of the older, more religious generation. Celia Adler, the daughter of Jacob and Dinah Adler (née Stettin) relates one such story in her memoirs. In this passage, Dinah recalls how Adler duped his future father-in-law into permitting her to go on the stage:

"Excuse me, Mr. Stettin, for taking the liberty to get involved in a family matter . . . I think you are wrong to tear your daughter away from the theatre. She is blessed by God with a great talent for the stage. The Jewish people and the Yiddish theatre need a God-given talent like your daughter's, so it's a sin to suppress it . . . I know that in respectable homes, people accept the notion that we are 'bums,' 'pickpockets,' charlatans, but believe me, Mr. Stettin, that is libel . . ."

At this point, Adler enumerated a list of names of great, world-reknowned artists, like Adolph Sonnenthal, Sarah Bernhardt, and others of whom not only my father,

but even I had never even heard.

"All of them have brought honor and pride to the Jewish people," continued Adler. "It may be, Mr. Stettin, that you will have the honor of your daughter bringing much pleasure to our troubled people. You must not stand in her way."²⁰

This story has all the makings of a Plautine plot, with the clever young lover tricking the senex into letting down his guard. Here, the father serves as the potential blocking figure not only to the lovers' union, but also to their theatrical careers. But Adler's device for overcoming the father's objections takes the form of an appeal invoking God, world reknown, and the honor of the Jewish people. Adler's polished rhetoric leaves the father speechless, unable to offer any serious objection to his daughter's theatrical debut. As the chapters that follow illustrate, Shakespeare's name would come in handy in similar appeals, giving the Yiddish theatre an undisputed status symbol to point to in its quest for legitimacy.

The second prong of Adler's appeal, the reference to Jewish actors who have succeeded in predominantly non-Jewish arenas, points to the self-consciousness of Yiddish theatre personnel. Dan Miron has described how nineteenth-century Yiddish writers, especially Sholem Aleichem, constructed the notion of a Yiddish literature with its own history and leading figures from the scantiest of raw materials. One of his primary vehicles for this construction was to turn Sholem Rabinovitsh, who wrote under the name Mendele Moykher Sforim (Little Mendl the Book Peddler), into the Grand Old Man of

Yiddish letters:

The legend of Abramovitsh as the "grandfather" of Yiddish letters, which Sholem Aleichem launched when Abramovitsh was fifty-two years old (he himself was then twenty-nine years old) can be considered the basis of our conception of modern Yiddish literature as a historical institution. He was generally inclined to refer to his favorite writers as old men. . . . People scarcely in their fifties he described as if they were tottering octogenarians. In this he camouflaged even from himself the shortness and scantiness of the tradition he was fabricating.²¹

The Yiddish theatre was similarly self-conscious from an early date. From the early 1890s on, Yiddish newspapers were inundated with articles on the history of Yiddish theatre, the state of Yiddish theatre, the future of Yiddish theatre. Actors still in the first half of their careers wrote newspaper articles on "How I Became a Yiddish Actor" or "The First Years of Yiddish Theatre." The Yiddish theatre waxed nostalgic about its beginnings almost as soon as it got under way, like a kindergartner introducing a memory of nursery school with the words, "When I was little . . ." It does not occur to the child to take such a backward glance until he perceives a change in himself. To the Yiddish actors, the first adaptations of Shakespeare were a stamp of legitimacy, a sign that they had moved from the swaddling clothes of their own repertoire to the grown-up attire of the world theatre.

Once the "Plague of the Classics" hit the Yiddish theatre, Shakespeare's plays took a prominent place on the American Yiddish stage. After all, the Yiddish theatre of this period, like the European and English-speaking American

theatres during most of the nineteenth century, was an actors' theatre, and Shakespeare provided star turns (which could be enhanced with some judicious editing) for strong leading actors. So just as such international stars as Kean (father and son), Booth (father and son), Kemble (the whole family), Macready, Forrest, Cushman, Duse, and Salvini displayed their talents in Shakespeare's leading roles throughout the century, most of the leading Yiddish actors in the United States would at some time or other test their mettle in translations and adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. After all, the professional Yiddish theatre was built on a foundation of melodramatic leading roles, and as Lawrence Levine has noted, many of Shakespeare's plays were suited to this style, since "Shakespearean drama featured heroes and villains who communicated directly with the audience and left little doubt about the nature of their character or their intentions."²² Moreover, a number of the most successful Yiddish playwrights, who were also accustomed to working in a melodramatic vein, would increase their fame and fortune by translating or adapting Shakespeare's work.

Yet all of these reasons combined--the need for new plots, powerful leading roles, Yiddish actors' quest for legitimacy and envy of their Gentile colleagues--only partially account for the prominent place Shakespeare's plays would come to take in American Yiddish theatres and theatre lore. For reasons that changed with the changing

circumstances of the American Jewish population, several of Shakespeare's plays--Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Romeo and Juliet, and The Merchant of Venice--took on special significance for Yiddish audiences. The most popular adaptations said something to their audiences about what it meant to be Jewish in America. For instance, Jacob Gordin's Der yidisher kenig Lir [The Jewish King Lear, 1892], written and produced during a period of tremendous immigration by Eastern European Jews, was in part a message to audiences that the leaving behind of old values, disorienting as it might be, could prove beneficial in the long run.

Yiddish writers approached the adaptation of Shakespeare from several artistic directions. One such mode belonged to the playwrights working essentially in the Goldfajn/Hurwitz/Lateiner vein: that is, combining a hodgepodge of melodramatic elements with a healthy dose of operetta. Later, when polemics over theatre heated up in the Yiddish press, critics would attach the word shund--literally, "trash"--to plays of this sort. Plots and characters taken from pre-existing sources (as they so often were) were frequently Judaized; as Gorin explains, "It was customary for earlier playwrights to take a foreign play, squeeze every drop of juice out of it, change the Gentile names to Jewish ones, slap on manly beards and peyes [side-locks worn by Hasidic men] and let them parade across the stage as Jews."²³ Sometimes such changes seemed gratuitous, an effective but superficial device to get the

audience's attention. Usually, however, even when the Judaization of Shakespeare seems casual or arbitrary at first glance, deeper analysis shows that the adaptor has carefully chosen the details that turn a Shakespeare play into a Jewish adaptation.

The plays of Jacob Gordin (1853-1909) transformed the Yiddish theatre in many ways, including the manner of adapting Shakespeare. Gordin, a Russian-born Jew with a broad secular education and liberal political views, admired such reformers of the European drama as Ibsen, Hauptmann, and Gorky, and sought to emulate them in his work. In The Jewish King Lear and Mirele Efros (subtitled "The Jewish Queen Lear"), Gordin freely adapted his source to suit his own aesthetic and political ends.

Like the earlier Yiddish playwrights, Gordin reworked his source material into a Jewish idiom, but he did so for didactic reasons. Such alterations would make the characters, language, and events in the play more immediately recognizable to his audience, and thus make it easier for them to appreciate his message. Unlike the earlier Yiddish playwrights, whose ultimate goal was always oriented towards--to paraphrase J. J. Shubert--putting fukheses in seats--Gordin wrote with an ideological agenda in mind. An analysis of how he put this agenda into effect in his Lear adaptations will provide, in miniature, a key to Gordin's technique, which had a profound impact on Yiddish drama.

Along with the new depth of seriousness which Gordin brought to the Yiddish stage came a new way of acting the plays. According to critic Nakhum Buchwald, Gordin not only changed the Yiddish theatre by moving away from the false heroics and romanticism in ghund plays; he also "made a positive impact with his plays both by educating an audience and by developing in actors a spirit of respect for the role, a spirit of piety for the task of depicting a person on the stage."²⁴ Such actors as Jacob P. Adler (1855-1926) and Keni Liptzin (c. 1856-1918), who were instrumental in establishing Gordin's success, found subtleties in Gordin's characters that had been almost completely lacking in previous Yiddish drama, so the Yiddish theatre moved towards a style much closer to everyday speech and gesture than anyone could have imagined before Gordin.

The fact that a self-consciously serious playwright like Gordin could actually make money writing plays encouraged a generation of imitators, some of whom also tried their hand at adapting Shakespeare. While some of these adaptations followed Gordin's lead by Judaizing their sources, others maintained the settings of the original, though often cutting some dialogue and consolidating some of the smaller speaking roles. Writers such as Mikhl Goldberg and D. M. Hermalin produced a number of translations in this vein from the mid-1890s through the first decade of the twentieth century. For reasons to be explored later, these versions tended to make

less of an impact on the Yiddish Shakespearean repertoire than did their Judaized counterparts.

Shakespeare meant different things to different generations of American Yiddish audiences. Many Yiddish theatre-goers of the 1880s and 1890s knew little or nothing about Shakespeare himself, so name recognition did not suffice to draw them to his plays. Subsequent generations, on the other hand, had the benefit of a secular education unknown to the massive waves of Jewish immigrants in the 1880s and 1890s, and hubs of learning such as the City College of New York exposed many of these young, eager students to the highlights of Western civilization. Yet that very education, along with other enticements offered by the New World, drew each subsequent generation a little bit further from mame-loshn--the mother tongue--and all the aspects of Jewish culture that it represented. It also helped make the translation of Shakespeare into Yiddish obsolete, for his plays were now more accessible in their original English. Ironically, as Jewish theatregoers became more sophisticated and thus more likely to be interested in Shakespeare, they would become less enthralled by the prospect of seeing his plays performed in Yiddish.

Nonetheless, Shakespeare's plays continued to hold a steady, if quantitatively diminished, place in the repertory. Leon Kobrin, one of the most prominent heirs to the Gordin legacy, provided actor Boris Thomashefsky (c. 1868-1939) with

a Judaized Othello: Der blinder muzikant [The Blind Musician, 1903]. Eventually, accomplished poets took the quality of Shakespearean translation into Yiddish to a much higher level. I. J. Schwartz had already achieved acclaim for his verse by the time he published what Leonard Prager calls the "first workmanlike translations of Shakespeare in Yiddish"²⁵ with his Hamlet and Julius Caesar in 1918. Yiddish adaptors rarely attempted a line-by-line translation of a Shakespeare play; Schwartz's versions are notable exceptions. Another anomaly, Mark Schweid's careful translation of Othello, was staged in 1929 by the Yiddish Art Theatre, a repertory company in the tradition of the Moscow Art Theatre. The company's founder and tyrannical director, Maurice Schwartz (ca. 1890-1960), who played Iago, would also create a sensation with his Shylock, which he played in excerpts on the Keith vaudeville circuit and in an adapted form with his own company.

Before the "Plague of the Classics" hit with full force, Shakespeare was introduced to American Yiddish audiences in a few isolated instances. The first recorded case of a Yiddish production in the United States being publicly perceived as "Shakespearean" was an import from the Yiddish theatre in London. Esther fun eyn-gedi [Esther of En-gedi], Benedict Ben-tsiyon's translation of Ester d'Engaddi [Esther of En-Gedi, 1832], by Silvio Pellico (1789-1854), was not initially advertised as a "Jewish Othello" when it was given its American premiere on 27 March 1885 at the Oriental Theatre in

New York. While it was not until 1887 that a critic for the Nyu-yorker yidishe folkstsaytung, reviewing a production at the Romania Opera House, wrote about Esther as if it were an adaptation of Othello, the play deserves mention here because it may have been the first American Yiddish play to be publicly considered "Shakespearean."

Although American theatre companies did not initially promote Esther as a "Jewish Othello,"²⁶ the fact that the reviewer told readers that the play was "written by Shakespeare under the name 'Othello'"²⁷ would have alerted the newspaper's readership to the notion of a Shakespearean foundation to the play. The main plot of the play certainly suggests that connection. The action, set in second-century Palestine, revolves around the wife of a courageous but temperamental Jewish military leader named Azariah (or "Othello-Azariah"²⁸ in the Folkstsaytung review). The Jewish High Priest--"Iago-Yiftakh," as the reviewer calls him--has lusted after "Esther-Desdemona"²⁹ for a long time, and tries to blackmail her by threatening to tell her husband that she has recently had contact with her father, who has been sentenced to death for having converted to Christianity. When she still spurns him, he tells the returning hero of her apparent trysts with a mysterious man, knowing full well that she will refuse to reveal her father's identity. Her silence, of course, only heightens her husband's suspicions, and he refuses to believe her claim that Yiftakh has made improper

advances to her. Azariah ultimately learns the truth, but only after Esther has drunk a poisonous potion created by Yiftakh, whom the general stabs before turning to mourn his falsely accused wife.

However widely or narrowly Ben-tsiyon's translation was perceived as deriving from Shakespeare, Esther of En Gedi did not inspire further Shakespearean adaptations. In fact, though one reviewer saw its resemblance to Othello, most theatregoers would have been more likely to see it as just one more example among countless so-called "historical operas" so popular on the Yiddish stage at the time.

Further uses of Shakespeare in the American Yiddish theatre would have to wait until the early 1890s, starting with the March 1892 announcement that Jacob Adler would play Othello to the Desdemona of Sigmund Mogulesco, one of the most popular Yiddish comedians of his day. Far from being an attempt to recreate the theatrical conditions of Shakespeare's time, with its all-male theatre troupes, this event consisted simply of a parodic sketch entitled Otelo, oder, Adler aroys fun di haloblyes [Othello, or, Adler Breaks Loose], which Jacob Gordin wrote as the afterpiece for a benefit performance for Adler.

Since no text of the sketch has survived, it is difficult to determine the target of the parody. The only available information about the content of the afterpiece comes from an ad for an 1897 revival, which announced

a hilarious comedy, in which Adler rehearses for Othello and stabs Mogulesco, who he thinks is his false wife Desdemona. In this powerful drama, Adler breaks loose, but in doing so he drives away his creditors. It is a scene filled with 45 minutes of laughter, but you will talk about it all week.³⁰

Since there is no record of Othello per se having been performed in the United States as of the sketch's premiere in March 1892, Gordin's afterpiece may have satirized Esther of En Gedi, which was known to at least some Yiddish speakers as a "Yiddish Othello." Yet Gordin was not one to assume any previous cultural knowledge on the part of his audience; given his tendency in other plays,³¹ he may have explained the reference to Othello in the course of the sketch and then parodied more general characteristics of the Yiddish theatre.

A newspaper advertisement that appeared two months after the debut of Gordin's parody serves as a curious curtain-raiser to a more widespread introduction of Shakespeare's plays onto the American Yiddish stage. The ad (or more precisely, an ad followed by what would today be called a press release printed below it) runs down most of a column in the Arbeter tsaytung of 27 May 1892, and actually promotes a performance in German rather than in Yiddish. For that and other reasons that will be made clear below, it is worth quoting in its entirety:

Thalia Theatre
46-48 Bowery
Monday evening, the 6th of June, 1892
JUST ONE PERFORMANCE
By the tragedian recognized by all the greatest and most

world-famous European newspapers

MR. MORRIS MORRISON

Born in Galatz, Romania, as

OTHELLO

The Moor of Venice, by Shakespeare. With an exceptional first-class German company of artists. The great artist Herr Morris Morrison has played this role of Othello in the following biggest cities in Europe and America: London, Berlin, Petersburg, Moscow, in the Meininger Hoftheater, in Dresden, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, etc. etc.

The following text continues below a black line, looking at first glance as if it were an unrelated entry:

On Monday, the 6th of June, in the Thalia Theatre, Morris Morrison, the greatest artist of our time, will appear in the role of "Othello," supported by a first-class, exceptional company of German actors. Herr Morrison was born in Romania, has made the greatest name for himself in the biggest cities in Europe and America, and stands on the same level with Salvini, Rossi, etc. The following are translations from various English and German newspapers. The German newspaper from Philadelphia. Germania Theatre . . . 'The guest performance by the Duke of Meiningen court actor Herr Morris Morrison has been extended for one week. Friends of the theatre will thank the director Heinemann, for he has kept the great artist on for one more week. Last week, the brilliant artist performed the role of the Mine Owner [a couple of words seem to be missing here] . . . as "Narcissus" in the play of the same name, and as Franz Moor in the "Robbers" by Schiller, and in every role celebrates triumph after triumph. Rarely on the German stage of Philadelphia stands an artist with such brilliance and ability who is equal to Herr Morrison's power in voice and facial expression. With his handsome, manly appearance, he wins the interest of audiences of the highest caliber.'

Translation from an English newspaper: 'Of all the Shakespearean roles that Herr Morris Morrison plays so masterfully, he stands higher in the role of "Othello" than anyone else who plays the role. Herr Morrison is blessed by nature with all the means to be a great tragedian. He has a beautiful, manly appearance. His voice is strong and sweet, and his acting exhibits an admirable talent. In Europe he has long been compared to Salvini, Rossi, Booth and McCullough.'

Another English newspaper: 'The great European tragedian Herr Morris Morrison is a talented artist from the famous Meiningen court actors. He has a beautiful

appearance and a deep, musical voice, so it is a pleasure both to see and hear him. Everywhere Herr Morrison has appeared, he has enjoyed the greatest triumph.' One of the greatest European newspapers writes the following about Herr Morrison's Othello: 'With the role of Othello, Herr Morrison has reached the highest level of Shakespearean tragedians. His Othello is unsurpassed; his speech in the court when he wins the heart of Desdemona, his acting in the jealousy scene, are incomparable. He performs with all his soul. Wondrous is the scene when he forces Iago to speak and he attempts to kill his beloved Desdemona,' etc. We cannot cite what all the major newspapers write about this brilliant artist. We are only saying that our co-religionist Herr Morris Morrison does honor to the Jewish people and we hope that New York Jewry will appear in great numbers at the Thalia Theater on Monday, June 6th to patronize this great artist.

--His Supporters³²

This explosion of advertising rhetoric is remarkable for a number of reasons besides the extraordinary length and detail of the text, especially considering the fact that it expends so much energy on just one performance. The ad demands close attention, for it raises issues that will resurface throughout the history of Shakespearean production on the American Yiddish stage.

What emerges most strikingly here is the emphasis on the talent and personality of one star actor, even to the extent of including information about him that at first glance might seem peculiar in such a medium. Specifically, the ad makes double-edged use of world geography. Neither Morrison's name, the play in which he will appear, nor the language in which it will be performed necessarily indicate his Jewishness, but the fact that he was born in Galatz, Romania, a city whose Jewish community experienced a rich but turbulent history,³³ is a

strong hint. The mention of Morrison's birthplace assures the reader that he is what Yiddish-speaking Jews call a landsmán--literally a countryman, but more broadly, a fellow Eastern European Jew. On the other hand, the names of several other cities, both European and American, should assure prospective audience members that if Morrison can make it everywhere else, he can make it in New York. The dual identity of the Yiddish actor--as an artist unencumbered by ethnicity or nationality on the one hand, and as a Jew with a Jewish following on the other--will continue to color the way audiences perceive Yiddish actors throughout the history of the American Yiddish theatre.

The roll call of European and American actors serves essentially the same purpose here as Morrison's illustrious itinerary, indicating that notable authorities (that is, newspapers) have recognized that Morrison has earned the honor of having his name mentioned in the same breath as those of the world's greatest actors. Furthermore, Morrison comes from a high pedigree: the renowned theatre troupe of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, whose name is invoked almost like a mantra throughout the ad. But while such references would make perfect sense for audiences familiar with Western theatre, a Yiddish theatre-goer in 1892 would be unlikely to recognize any of these names. Assuming that the newspaper reviews cited here are translated more or less faithfully, the references might have made sense to most of their original readers. When

transferred to a Yiddish newspaper, however, this information seems to be dropped into a cultural vacuum.

However, even readers who have never heard of Salvini, Booth, or the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen would probably assume from the context that these are noteworthy theatrical figures. The ad does not shy away from superlatives, but it pretends to balance its own subjectivity by relying on "facts" and authorities: newspaper reviews (and in the last paragraph, a review within a review), the actor's background, and his place in the theatrical pantheon. As the Yiddish theatre in the United States develops, the interaction between Yiddish and non-Yiddish theatre escalates, and Yiddish actors and audiences become increasingly--even intensely--aware that other theatrical venues exist. Yiddish theatre critics and actors spend a great deal of energy trying to figure out the position of Yiddish theatre within the context of world theatre,³⁴ and Yiddish audiences take great pride in pointing out influences of the Yiddish theatre on the English-speaking American stage and screen.

Like Yiddish fiction in the nineteenth century, Yiddish theatre during its first couple of decades displayed a curious ambivalence to the Yiddish language--another characteristic that emerges in this advertisement. It does not come through clearly in translation, but the language of the ad is far from what anyone would consider standard Yiddish. A transliteration of the last sentence, followed by the same

sentence transliterated into more standard Yiddish, might help convey the idea:

Vir zogen nor dos unzer gloybens bruder Herr Morrison izt eyne ere fir unzer yudentum und vir hofen dos dos nyu yorker yudentum vird am Montag den 6ten yuni tsolraykh ershaynen in Thalia Teater um dizen groysen kinstler tsu patronayzen.

Mir zogn nor as unzer gloybns bruder Herr Morrison iz a koved far unzer yidntum un mir hofn as dos nyu yorker yidntum vet montik dem 6ten yuni kumen filtsolik in Thalia Teater tsu patronayzn dem dozikn groysn kinstler.

To anyone hoping for 'straight' translations of Shakespeare into Yiddish, this seems an inauspicious start: a German-language production announced in a highly Germanized Yiddish. The dialogue in Yiddish plays of the time also tended to be riddled with daytshmerish, especially when spoken by characters of aristocratic origin. However, just months after this production, the success of Jacob Gordin's Der yidisher kenig Lir would help eliminate daytshmerish from the stage.

Just as interesting as what the ad emphasizes is one significant detail that it hardly mentions: the play's authorship. The upper portion of the ad simply indicates that the play is "by Shakespeare," but the advertisement does not repeat his name in the lower portion, as it does with other information, however tangential, that the ad sets out to emphasize. The ad does, however, allude to two scenes from the play. These can again be seen as examples of information in a cultural vacuum, but they seem to serve as specific testimonials to the quality of Morrison's acting.

Though once an illustrious performer, Morrison had fallen

on hard times, and a few months earlier would have been an unlikely candidate to play any Shakespeare character besides perhaps Caliban or the Porter in Macbeth. Boris Thomashefsky and his wife Bessie, in separate memoirs written two decades apart, both describe how Morrison showed up at the Standard Theater in Chicago when Thomashefsky's company was playing there, apparently in the middle to late 1880s. Their accounts differ in a number of respects, but both agree on the following: Morrison first came to them in tattered clothes and a long beard, and told them his name was Davidson. He eventually landed odd jobs around the theatre, and at one point or another (the accounts diverge radically on this), revealed that he was actually Morris Morrison, former star of the German stage.³⁵

Beyond that general outline of the story, the couple's recollection of Morrison's arrival differs in several noteworthy respects. Both memoirists describe the mystery that surrounded this strange, very tall, and somehow noble figure, but Bessie's description takes on a religious tone. She dwells on the cast's curiosity over the stranger while he is doing odd jobs around the theatre. Some suggest he may be a king in exile, others a bankrupt tycoon, and still others, a "lamed-vovnik"--according to Jewish folklore, one of the thirty-six saintly men who exist in every generation (lamed-vov are the Hebrew letters with the numerical value of thirty-six). The latter theory gains credence when the cast members

notice the disdain with which he seems to look upon their rehearsals; they see a touch of contempt for Yiddish theatre as the sign of a healthy soul. All doubt as to his saintliness disappears when he intervenes in a fight between a skinny Jew and a strong Gentile, and thrashes the latter mercilessly. After the fight, the so-called Davidson reveals his true identity:

He became extraordinarily friendly and spoke with us willingly, justifying himself by saying that he did not mean to beat the poor Gentile so much, but he could not look on while the weak Jew was being beaten, because: he himself is a Jew, he told us. And his real name is Moyshe Cohn, but, he smiled amiably, "On the German stage, my name is Morris Morrison."³⁶

The anecdote resonates with the aura of tales from many religions in which holy men reveal themselves, as in the Hasidic legend describing how Israel Baal Shem Tov, the founder of modern Hasidism, revealed his saintliness at the significant age of thirty-six:

On that particular Saturday, a pupil . . . interrupted a journey to spend Shabbat [the Jewish Sabbath] with Israel and Hannah. It was midnight when he awoke trembling with fright: a huge flame was rising from the hearth. Thinking to prevent a fire, he ran to extinguish it. When, instead, he saw his host flooded in light, he fainted. . . . After Shabbat, the traveler hurried back to Brodi, where he stormed into the House of Study, shouting the great news: "There is a new source of light close by." The men rushed to the edge of the forest and there built a throne with branches and leaves. [Israel] took his seat. "I shall open a new way," he declared.³⁷

Given the ambivalence of Yiddish actors toward their own repertoire and practice, the subtext of Bessie Thomashefsky's description rings with a messianic note: this larger-than-

life, mysterious figure reveals himself as a man endowed with knowledge and experience from another world, the world of Gentile theatre.

But Morrison would not be the one to "open a new way" for Yiddish actors. Though some observers, such as Gorin, saw Morrison as the first to bring "the influence of the better drama" to Yiddish stages,³⁸ Morrison continued to perform in German rather than in Yiddish. Indeed, in an article that appeared on the day after Morrison's death in 1917, Abraham Cahan reminded readers that Morrison was "a German actor, not a Yiddish one," and added, "had Morrison learned to perform in plain Yiddish, he would certainly have lost seventy-five percent of his popularity with us."³⁹ Cahan's assessment may have been correct; in any case, it is consistent with the Yiddish theatre's inferiority complex at the time. Even the most ardent supporters of Yiddish theatre saw Morrison as a privileged being, one whose Jewishness did not confine him to performing for Jews. Boris Thomashefsky recalled that the first time he went to see Morrison perform, at the German-language Irving Place Theatre in New York, "I was very jealous of that Jew Morrison, who plays in the German theatre before such a public, who come in carriages, dressed up as for a holiday, in frocks and evening dresses."⁴⁰

Morrison's final performance, again as Othello, ended a career that straddled different realms of the Diaspora: an actor performing in German outside of Germany, and

occasionally in Yiddish theatres, but never in the Yiddish language. When the actor's curious contact with the Yiddish theatre began, Shakespeare was all but unknown to American Yiddish audiences. Perhaps Morrison's Othello in June of 1892 launched the beginning of an era, for the following October, Jacob Gordin's adaptation of King Lear--the first full-length Yiddish play to advertise itself as a Shakespearean adaptation at the time of its premiere--was produced in New York.

NOTES

1. For an overview in English of the nature of the purimshpil, see Nahma Sandrow, Vagabond Stars (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 1-20. More detailed history and analysis of the purimshpil can be found in B. Gorin, Di geshikhte fun idishn teater (New York, 1923), 1:19-63; J. Shatsky, "An akhashveyrosh-shpil mit 100 yor tsurik," in Arkhiy far der geshikhte fun yidishn teater un drame, ed. J. Shatsky (New York, 1930), 159-74; J. Shatsky, "Di ershte geshikhte fun yidishn teater," Filologishe shriftn (Vilna: Farlag fun B. Kletskin, 1928), 2:215-64; I. Shipper, Geshikhte fun yidisher teater-kunst un drame (Warsaw: Farlag "Kultur Lige," 1923-28), 3 vols.; Max Weinreich, "Tsu der geshikhte fun der alterer akhashveyrosh-shpil," Filologishe shriftn, (Vilna, 1928), 2:425-52; and Zalmen Zylbercweig, Leksikon fun yidishn teater (New York, 1963), 4:3610-3629.

2. For an overview of Haskole drama and Goldfadn's career, see Sandrow, 21-69. Further information on these subjects appears in Gorin, 1:64-82 and 1:132-55; Sholom Perlmutter, Yidische dramaturgn un teater-kompozitors (New York: YKUF, 1952), 51-60; Shipper, 3:84-100; and Zylbercweig, 1:275-367.

3. Basic information on the badkhn can be found in I. Lifschitz, "Badkhonim un leytsim bay yidn," in Shatsky, Arkhiy, 38-74; Shipper, 1:66-80, 3:20-42; and Zylbercweig, 1:132-144.

4. Sandrow, 36. Other fundamental material on Broder singers appears in Gorin, 1:132-49; Shatsky, Arkhiy, 455; and Zylbercweig, 1:216-36 and 1:508-15.

5. Sandrow, 43.

6. See, for example, Gorin, 1:167-256 and Sandrow, 40-90.

7. Mark Slobin, Tenement Songs (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 3.

8. Sandrow, 98.

9. For more on Hurwitz, see Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur, 3:112-114; Perlmutter, 66-72; and Zylbercweig, 1:591-605. For material on Lateiner, see Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur, 4:414-416; Perlmutter, 61-65; and Zylbercweig, 2:964-90. Gorin assesses the two playwrights' dramaturgy in 2:72-93, while a summary of the work of these writers and their contemporaries appears in Sandrow, 104-114. For a detailed assessment of the competition between Hurwitz and Lateiner in New York, see Marvin Leon Seiger, "A History of the Yiddish Theatre in New York City to 1892" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1960), 196-310.

10. This mini-performance and others are described in Gorin, 1:96-98. Similar experiences are described in Leon Kobrin, Erinerungen fun a yidishn dramaturg (New York: Committee for Kobrin's Writings, 1925), 1:28-29; and Boris Thomashefsky, Thomashefsky's teater shriftn (New York, 1908), 23-27.
11. Seiger, 314.
12. Ibid., 321.
13. For a discussion of playwright and theatre manager John F. Poole, see Walter Meserve, "Our English-American Playwrights of the Mid-Nineteenth Century," Journal of American Drama and Theatre 1 (Spring 1989), 16-17.
14. Gorin, 2:74. This and all other translations from the Yiddish are mine unless noted otherwise.
15. Moyshe Zeifert, "Di geshikhte fun idishn teater," in Di idishe bine, ed. Chanon Jacob Minikes (New York, 1897), 44-45.
16. Dan Miron, "Folklore and Antifolklore in the Yiddish Fiction of the Haskala," in Studies in Jewish Folklore, ed. Frank Talmage (Cambridge, MA: Association for Jewish Studies, 1980), 219.
17. Boris Thomashefsky, Mayn lebns-geshikhte (New York: Trio Press, 1937), 271.
18. Alexander Harkavy, "Iz yidish a shprakh fir drame?" Di fraye yidishe folksbine 1 (1897), 17.
19. "Unzer platform," Di fraye yidishe folksbine 1 (1897), 2.
20. Celia Adler, Tsili Adler dertseylt (New York: Celia Adler Foundation, 1959), 25.
21. Dan Miron, A Traveler Disguised (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 30.
22. Lawrence Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 38.
23. Gorin, 2:116.
24. Nakhum Buchwald, Teater (New York: Farlag-Komitet Teater, 1943), 297.
25. Prager, 156.
26. The first advertisement I have found that gives Esther fun eyn-ge-di the subtitle "The Jewish Othello" did not appear until 1898.

27. "Dos rumenye opera hoyz," Nyu-yorker yidishe folkstsavtung, 14 Oct. 1887.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Yiddish Theatre Broad­sides, Jewish Division, New York Public Library.
31. Chapter 2 treats several of Gordin's plays and sketches in detail.
32. Di arbeter tsaytung, 27 May 1892. It has been difficult to substantiate any of the advertisement's claims. The New York Times Index makes no reference whatsoever to Morrison in the late 1880s and early 1890s. A review of Schiller's Maria Stuart in April 1892, just before the Arbeter tsaytung ad appeared, provides a cast list that does not include Morrison ("Maria Stuart," New York Times, 9 April 1892). He may well have been a member of Saxe-Meiningen's company, but if so, he left the troupe before the spring of 1892.
33. See Encyclopaedia Judaica (Jerusalem: Macmillan, 1971), 7:261-62.
34. Notable examples include Buchwald, Teater; Z. Kornblith, Di dramatishe kunst (New York: Itshe V. Biderman's Bukh Gesheft, 1928); and A. Mukdoiny, Teater (New York: A. Mukdoiny Yubiley-Komitet, 1927).
35. Boris Thomashefsky, Mayn lebns-geshikhte, 245-60; Bessie Thomashefsky, Mayn lebns-geshikhte (New York: Varhayt Publishing Company, 1916), 166-70.
36. Bessie Thomashefsky, 168.
37. Elie Wiesel, Souls on Fire (New York: Random House, 1972), 14.
38. Gorin, 2:169.
39. Abraham Cahan, "Morits Morrison's role af der idisher bine," Forverts, 29 August 1917.
40. Boris Thomashefsky, "Thomashefsky bashraybt vi azoy er hot zikh bakent mit Morrison'en," Forverts, 30 August 1917.

CHAPTER 2

JACOB GORDIN'S KING AND QUEEN LEAR

Jacob Gordin (1853-1909), who would ultimately become one of the most controversial and influential Yiddish playwrights, did not begin his playwriting career until he was almost forty, but the activities that filled the first two-thirds of his life deeply informed his dramas. He had worked as a journalist, political activist, teacher, actor, theatre critic, and leader of a utopian Jewish agrarian movement before moving to New York in 1891. His most important plays reflected his didacticism, his appreciation of modern European drama, and his simultaneous commitment to both Judaism and progressive social and political ideals. His two plays inspired by King Lear--Der yidisher kenig lir [The Jewish King Lear, 1892] and Di yidishe kenigin lir, oder Mirele Efros [The Jewish Queen Lear, or Mirele Efros, 1898] epitomize Gordin's dramaturgic method and goals. The Jewish King Lear blends Gordin's social and aesthetic agenda with compromises he had to make to accommodate the theatrical conditions of the day. That play's success allowed him to write Mirele Efros according to his own plan, making Mirele both the fruit of his earlier success and the wellspring of his subsequent notoriety. Both plays would not only enjoy constant revivals, but would also become part of Yiddish theatrical lore.

Gordin was born on 1 May 1853 in Mirgorod, Ukraine. His

father was a Hasid, but also a maskil, a follower of the Enlightenment, and Jacob received both a traditional Jewish education and a broad exposure to Western culture, learning Hebrew, German, and Russian with the tutors his father hired to teach him. Around 1870, he began writing for the Russian press, and also got involved in politics, joining a movement dedicated to gaining Ukraine's independence from Russia. After his marriage at the age of nineteen to a girl from a rich family, he was supposed to settle into a business career. Since that did not suit his temperament, however, he tried his hand at other work: farmer, dock worker, actor in a traveling Russian company, teacher in a Russian-Jewish school. Meanwhile, he continued his journalistic work, including theatrical criticism for a progressive St. Petersburg newspaper.

In 1880, Gordin founded the Spiritual Biblical Brotherhood, an organization whose ethos Gordin would later inject into his dramas. The Brotherhood recognized neither Jewish ritual nor such dogma as the immortality of the soul. Instead, it integrated modern norms and knowledge into its interpretation of the Torah. The controversial organization folded in 1881 during a period of pogroms, but Gordin helped revive and even legalize it in 1885. When the government forbade him to found a Tolstoyan commune in 1889, he began making plans to move to form a socialist colony in America.

In July 1891, Gordin moved to New York, where he quickly

made a strong impression among Yiddish writers and actors. What first caught their attention was not Gordin the writer but Gordin the man, whose majestic presence made actors like Bessie Thomashefsky take note:

His appearance impressed all of us. He was tall and thin, with a remarkably handsome, noble face; deep, intelligent eyes; a beautiful black beard, neatly trimmed; a great head of thick, black, curly hair, combed down to his nape; a large, soft black hat with a broad brim; a poor but clean suit that fit him well; and a walking stick in his hand.¹

The critic Shmuel Niger, citing the above description, argued that in order to understand Gordin's influence, one must recognize Gordin's persona as an integral part of his creative output. "His appearance was a part of his self. It was an expression of the strength he exerted, an emanation from his soul."² Gordin would combine his enormous charisma with a dramaturgic talent for placing the resources of the Yiddish theatre in the service of his didactic goals to become what Niger described as "the last of the American Yiddish enlighteners."³

Fellow socialists invited Gordin to write for their newspaper, Di arbeter tsaytung, but since the sketches he wrote did not earn him enough to feed his large family, he decided to supplement his income by writing plays. Two other factors further encouraged him to become a dramatist: the intelligence of the Yiddish actors he met and what he saw as the appalling state of the Yiddish theatre. A few years later, he summed up his feelings upon first visiting the

Yiddish theatre: "Everything that I heard and saw was far from Jewish life: coarse, unaesthetic, false, mean, and vulgar."⁴ Gordin, ever the utopian reformer, then set out to change the Yiddish theatre himself:

I went home and sat to write my first drama, which at its circumcision was given the name "Siberia." I wrote my first play as a God-fearing man, a scribe, writes out a book of the Torah. Such a scribe, every time he writes God's name, immerses himself in the mikveh [ritual bath]. Naturally, I did not go to the mikveh, but I guarded my pen so that every word should be clean and every thought holy. Then I wrote with the blood from my veins and the brain in my head.⁵

As much as he may scorn the vulgarity of Yiddish actors and audiences, Gordin takes his job as playwright very seriously, even daring to compare it to the writing of the Torah, the linchpin of the Jewish religion.

Gordin may never have made it as a playwright without the support of actor Jacob P. Adler (1855-1926). Adler had been among the first Yiddish actors in Russia, and was already a major star by the time Gordin arrived in New York. After encouraging Gordin to write for the theatre, Adler took the starring role in Gordin's first play, Siberia (1891). Gordin's drama omitted much of the typical fare of Yiddish plays at the time, such as daytshmerish, song and dance, and swordfights, thus bewildering many actors and audience members alike. During rehearsals, Adler fought with his fellow actors to respect Gordin's dramaturgy, and then had to cajole the audience into giving the play a fair hearing. On opening night, the audience became increasingly restless during the

first two acts, prompting Adler to make a tearful appeal to them after the Act II curtain. Actor Leon Blank, a member of the cast of Siberia, recalled Adler's entreaty as follows:

I stand here embarrassed and humiliated, my head bowed in shame, that you, my friends, cannot understand such a masterpiece by the famous Russian writer Yakov Mikhailovitch Gordin. My friends, my friends, if you understood what a great work we are performing for you today, you would not laugh and would not shout.⁶

According to Blank, the audience settled down for Act III, and burst into tears at the play's climax. Gordin had scored a commercial and critical success, and found in Adler his leading man par excellence: attentive enough to detail to create a subtext for his characters, but not so grounded in realism as to be unable to deliver a climactic speech in grand nineteenth-century fashion.

Gordin wrote prolifically about the theatre as well as for it, and his theatrical criticism sheds light on both the form and the content of his plays. His critiques appeared in a variety of forms, such as essays, rhymed verse, and skits, all of them articulating and reinforcing a consistent ethos of what constitutes good theatre. While, as is often the case, the theory does not always come to fruition on stage, Gordin's theatre theory provides a recognizable foundation for both the content and dramaturgy of his plays.

A few months before the premiere of The Jewish King Lear, Gordin published in the New York newspaper Di arbeter tsaytung a 200-line poem in rhymed couplets entitled, "The Subject of My Future Drama." In the poem, which he had previously read

on stage at a benefit at the Romania Opera House, Gordin describes the "subject" neither of his Lear nor of any other play he plans to write. Instead, he describes the play that an archetypal Yiddish theatregoer named Khayim-Yankl goes to see, a fantastical five-act operetta blending everything Gordin finds wrong with the Yiddish theatre: pseudo-historical characters, elaborate spectacle, gratuitous fights, and music and comedy based on both Biblical and modern sources. Gordin sets out to show how ridiculous most Yiddish plays are, and then provides a note at the end in case his readers have not caught on to his reductio ad absurdum:

I only wanted openly to tell our public that the right to be a critic and give one's opinion belongs only to those who understand something. However, those who attend our Yiddish theatres understand very little. . . . I just wanted to make all Yiddish actors aware that they are taking the wrong path: on the one hand laughing at Khayim-Yankl and making fun of him, on the other flattering him and letting themselves perform all sorts of idiocy to please him. They debase the people as well as their own talents. I did not expect that I would become a Yiddish dramatist, but now that I am, I will do everything I can to clean the mud off of the Yiddish stage.⁷

In practice, the task would not be so clear-cut. Since Gordin had to write for the actors and audiences who were reared in a tradition which he scorned, his two versions of King Lear would bear some of the signs of that tradition. As he began establishing himself, however, Gordin was able to move further away from the characteristics that dominated the Yiddish theatre at the start of his career.

Gordin elaborated on his aesthetic in an 1897 essay

entitled, "How to Understand a Drama." Gordin simultaneously flatters and insults his readers, first assuring them that it is harder to understand a play than to write one, then indicating that most of them have all the aesthetic sensibility of horses and dogs. Their bestial taste prevents them from appreciating the true goal of art: "to help man improve his character, to satisfy his highest needs, to develop his spirit."⁸ Gordin likens the arts to a tree (on one of whose branches grows Shakespeare's poetry), and concludes that drama is the highest art form since all the other arts serve it. Ultimately, rather than explaining how to understand a drama, Gordin provides a discourse on what kind of drama is worth understanding: that which elevates rather than debases--in other words, that which qualifies as Art.

Gordin had previously spun these themes into a one-act comic sketch entitled Yokl the Opera Maker, which served as an afterpiece to another Gordin play, The Jewish Priest, both plays premiering at a benefit for Gordin at Adler's Theatre on 3 May 1894. A newspaper ad for the production emphasized Yokl's function as criticism:

Whoever does not understand what Jacob Gordin has done for the Yiddish theatre and Yiddish literature, he . . . he should go see the comedy "Yokl the Opera Maker." Then this critique of the Yiddish theatre will really make him begin to understand.⁹

Gordin's sketch is billed not just as comic entertainment, but as an educational opportunity. While the audience watches

Yokl, they can appreciate Gordin's contribution to the Yiddish theatre; by this point in his playwriting career, Gordin had written five full-length dramas as well as two adaptations of Goldfadn plays. The ellipsis near the end of the ad appears in the original, as if the copy writer was so staggered by the thought of someone not appreciating Gordin's greatness that he had to pause to catch his breath.

In Yokl (whose name is a diminutive for Yankev, Gordin's first name in Yiddish), Gordin simultaneously presents his weighty ideas about art and pokes fun at that seriousness, as the play makes clear that the Yiddish theatre has no place for such high-mindedness. Yokl, an idealistic composer, has been commissioned to write music for a historical operetta, the same type of play Gordin sketched in his Arbeter tsaytung poem. Shlemiel Ox, the show's director, indicates the pile of books in his arms as he exhorts Yokl to follow his example:

See here, I've got some scissors, and in an hour I'll stitch together a brand new historical operetta . . . a scene from here, an act tacked on from over there, a couple of acts stolen from an old operetta, an epilogue pilfered from a French melodrama, a prologue from Barnum and Bailey's Circus with clever sayings for the comedians . . . and brother, there you have a new, crackling, successful, historical opera! And the boobs give money and shout "Bravo!" Yokl, don't be a yokel; write operas--that is, steal music and shut up.¹⁰

Gordin implies that Shlemiel carries out the standard operating procedure for writing Yiddish plays, brazenly stealing material from sources that have nothing in common except their potential entertainment value.

When Yokl naively tries to resist such cheap tactics,

Shlemiel insists that the more outlandish the effect, the more the audience will applaud. "And Shakespeare? What will he get you? A pussy abscess and two ulcers!" (186) Yokl balks at the allusion:

Oh, why is poor Shakespeare guilty, when you destroy him? Shakespeare and Professor Treytl Henfoot [a thinly veiled allusion to Yiddish playwright "Professor" Hurwitz] are all the same to you. You throw scenes out of Shakespeare's classic works and put in silly couplets and stolen jokes and perform it so that the public doesn't understand what you say, and the actors don't understand what Shakespeare wants from them. (186)

Yokl goes on to describe a performance he saw of Antony and Cleopatra in Yiddish, in which the stars mugged shamelessly for the audience, then got together behind the prompter's box and sang:

Do not leave me!
Oh woe is me!
A boil on my heart!
I freeze when we part! (186)

Through the example of a hypothetical Yiddish production of Shakespeare, Gordin assaults a number of his favorite targets: plagiarism, amateurishness, declamatory acting, stilted lyrics, and slapdash adaptations of classical texts. Yet Gordin paradoxically sidesteps the latter problem by departing further from his source, offering audiences not a slapdash translation of King Lear, but a contemporary, Jewish, prose equivalent of Shakespeare's play.

The Jewish King Lear opened on 21 October 1892 at the Union Theatre in New York City, with Jacob Adler in the title role of Dovid Moyshesles, a successful Russian Jewish

businessman. The play opens in Dovid's home, where the family is preparing for Purim, the holiday commemorating the Jewish victory over Haman, the ancient Persian Prime Minister whose plan to exterminate the Jews was thwarted by the Jewish Queen Esther. Purim represents an inversion of the usual order; similarly, the hierarchy within the Moyshes household will be temporarily turned upside down over the course of the play.

Purim is also one of the most festive of Jewish holidays; as the servant Shamay reminds us, "On Purim it's a commandment to be happy."¹¹ Shamay decisively fulfills that commandment in Act I, frequently responding to Dovid's wife, Khane-Leye, in rhyme. Berl Bernstein, a comic actor known for his broad gestures and long-legged dancing talents, created the role of Shamay. According to Celia Adler, daughter of Jacob Adler and actress Dina Feinman, "Bernstein was not a character-painter; he was a first-class burlesque comedian, a very dextrous dancer. The dance rhythm lay not only in his feet; he often moved in time with the music with a cheek, or with his little glued-on beard." But Bernstein occasionally attempted a character role: "for example, he created and became famous in the role of Shamay . . ."¹² Gordin may have originally wanted an actor who would have fleshed out the role with minute character details, such as those Adler could create to make Dovid Moyshes come to life. If Gordin had had such an actor, perhaps Shamay would be a subtler character, rather than one with so many rhymes and asides. Whatever Gordin's

ideal, though, audiences seemed to have been satisfied with the result.

While Dovid's wife, Khane-Leye, prepares the feast, her youngest daughter, Taybele, asks permission to invite her teacher Yaffe, an enlightened Jew who scoffs at Orthodox Judaism: "Koylitsh [a large, coiled bread made especially for Purim] and Megillah [i.e. the Book of Esther, which tells the story of Purim] is the entire Jewish history. Megillah is Jewry's blind faith and fanaticism, koylitsh its practical life. Ach, little Jews, the less Megillah and the more koylitsh, the healthier you'll be!" In a sense, the rest of the play is a footnote to Yaffe's remark. The unsympathetic characters worry about the idea of piety without being pious, while the good characters do good deeds regardless of whether their actions follow accepted conventions.

Dovid's three daughters represent the three major strands of nineteenth-century Judaism. Taybele and Yaffe are labeled heretics by her pietistic sisters and brothers-in-law. Her eldest sister, Etele, and husband Avrom Kharif are misnagdim [anti-Hasidic Orthodox Jews], who therefore despise the other sister, Gitele, and her Hasidic husband, who bears the emblematic name of Moyshe Khosid [or Hasid]. Both of these couples find common ground in their contempt for the heretics. The play will develop a tacit but clear thesis: that the religious Jews follow the letter of Jewish law but betray its spirit, while the play's "heretics" prove themselves to be the

true Jews because of their honesty, learning, and compassion.

Recent Eastern European Jewish immigrants struggling to strike an acceptable balance between their religious traditions and the customs of their new home may have found comfort in Gordin's secular approach to Jewish values. Historian Arthur Hertzberg writes of those immigrants,

They knew that they had to learn American manners, and that the observances of the Jewish religion, and especially of the Sabbath, were obstacles to success. . . . And yet, Jews continued to believe, into the second generation and beyond, that "Jewish values," the specific heritage that the immigrants had brought with them from Eastern Europe, had to be preserved.¹³

What works as a social message, however, does not necessarily work as drama. The daughters and in-laws in The Jewish King Lear so obviously represent specific political points of view that they do not entirely come across as living, breathing characters.

Dovid enters and gives diamonds to his daughters. Etele and Gitele respond with obvious flattery, but Taybele, rather than thank her father, wonders aloud why people need jewelry when they have God-given beauty. This response starts her sisters and brothers in-law on a tirade about a woman's place, but her father appreciates her answer and kisses her. He then bids her drink, and though she refuses at first, she gives in when he insists. He reminds everyone of his authority: "When I say that it's day, you all must say that it is day, and when I say that it's night, you all must say that it is night."

Dovid asks Yaffe to sing a song, and while Shamay

suggests something from the Yiddish theatre, Yaffe chooses something his great-grandfather taught him: interestingly enough, a song in praise of God. Shamay follows with a paean based on the traditional blessings over wine, fruit, and vegetables. Shamay's song marks the end of an era. At this point, wine flows freely and food abounds in the Moyshelles household. Before long, such commodities will be scarce, and the characters will no longer raise their voices in acknowledgment of their Creator's hand in the food they eat.

Dovid then makes a startling announcement; he will divide his assets among his children and go to Palestine with his wife, who knew nothing of this plan before. His two older daughters thank him profusely, but Taybele again says nothing. When pressed once more, she exclaims, "Father, don't destroy your own happiness! Listen to me, don't do it, I beg you!" Enraged at her disobedience, he sends her away. Yaffe then makes explicit the parallel to Shakespeare:

Reb Dovidl, please excuse me, but I do not know whether you have heard of the world-famous writer Shakespeare. I know a drama of his entitled King Lear. This king, at the same point in his life as you, divided his kingdom. Just as you have expelled your beloved daughter Taybele, so he expelled his beloved daughter Cordelia, who told him the truth. Ach, how dearly that old man paid for what he did. And you are the Jewish King Lear. May God protect you from the fate that befell King Lear.

An audience well-versed in Western literature would not need such a detailed explication of the play's title; indeed, it would belabor the point. But Gordin assumed that most of his audience was not only unfamiliar with King Lear, but had never

even heard of Shakespeare. In that case, Yaffe's précis of Shakespeare's play serves three purposes: to acquaint the audience with the name of a "world-famous writer" and with that of one of his masterpieces; and to explain the title's connection to the story. After all, Yiddish play titles before Gordin's time tended to provide a straightforward description, usually of the protagonist, the setting, or the play's central event (e.g. Goldfaden's Shulamis or Hurwitz's The Johnstown Flood). But if the audience had not heard of Shakespeare's King Lear, the epithet "The Jewish King Lear" would make no sense unless the playwright provided some sort of explanation.

After his remarks on Shakespeare and King Lear, Yaffe leaves and Shamay asks to go with Dovid. Dovid replies, "Where I will be, you will also be." His prediction echoes Ruth's vow to Naomi: "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."¹⁴ He bids everyone drink again, which brings about a curious transition. A chorus enters and sings a finale, as if this were a musical comedy of the period. The text has provided no notice that more people will be coming, although on Purim, many Jews customarily visited the homes of the wealthier citizens in the community, where they performed skits (purimshpiln) and partook of the hosts' food. Since the Act's finale retells the story of

Purim, the realistic explanation for the entrance of this crowd may be that they are performing a purimsphil. Theatre history, however, provides a more fundamental explanation. Gordin wrote in reaction to the prevailing Yiddish theatre trends of musical comedy, melodrama, and operetta. Although he expressed his contempt for these forms, the actors and audiences were not ready for them to be discarded wholesale. Therefore, the rousing chorus number at the end of the act makes a concession to the dominant theatrical forms of the day.

As Shamay rocks a baby's cradle at the beginning of Act II, he compares his lowly status under Kharif and Etele to his years of plenty as Dovid's servant:

The world is a dreydl. Here, just a year ago, I was a commissioner for Reb Dovidl. I got from him good tobacco, kharoyeses for Passover, vegetables for Shavues and an etrog and a lulav for Sukkes, wax for Haydalah, a carp for the Sabbath . . . and now I'm nothing more than a simple servant-shikse.

Besides telling the audience what has happened since the curtain fell on Act I, this monologue expresses the vicissitudes of life in terms of Jewish festivals. Having the right ingredients for celebrating the festivals makes life complete. The examples Shamay uses to express this idea are noteworthy. He begins the passage with a Jewish version of Edmund's comment, "The wheel has come full circle, I am here" (V.iii.175). In lieu of using the Christian image of the wheel of fortune, Gordin illustrates life's ups and downs in terms of the dreydl, a spinning top associated with Hanukkah.

Passover, Shavues, and Sukkes are the Jewish harvest festivals. Kharoyeses is a dish made of chopped apples, walnuts, wine, and cinnamon, and eaten on matzoh to symbolize the mortar with which the Jews in Egypt were made to build the pyramids. The vegetables eaten on Shavues indicate the holiday's agricultural connection. Such an association also informs Shamay's mention of the etrog and lulav, the citron and branches that fulfill the commandment in Leviticus 23:40:

And ye shall take you on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, branches of palm-trees, and boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook, and ye shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days.¹⁵

Sabbath is not only the day of rest, but the holiest of Jewish holidays. Jews would scrimp and even borrow in order to mark it with a special meal, often including fish and meat. Havdalah marks the end of the Sabbath and the beginning of the working week. Taken as a whole, then, the holidays Shamay mentions mark annual and weekly cycles--milestones by which to chart the progress of one's life.

As the second act progresses, Gordin underscores the pettiness of the offspring who call themselves religious--whether Hasid or misnagid--and the humanity of those with no formal religious affiliation. Gordin illustrates this most clearly through a recurring image; as Leonard Prager observes, "The central theme of the play is throughout symbolized in terms of food; the prevailing emotional state is one of oral anxiety; at the moment of greatest discord, the most violent act committed is the breaking of dishes."¹⁶ Shamay complains

of hunger throughout the act, and when Dovid asks for something to eat (for the kitchen is locked), Etele brings him radishes and a roll. Her husband Avrom Kharif now controls the family fortune and rules with a tight fist. He has even cut off his benefactor, so that after a few months in Palestine, Dovid and Khane-Laye had to return home rather than beg in a foreign land.

A legend involving The Jewish King Lear illustrates how strongly Yiddish audiences took this "oral anxiety" to heart. Celia Adler recalls that during a performance of the play in Montreal, one audience member ultimately could not suppress his agitation during Etele's mistreatment of her father:

In that scene, my father would very vividly illustrate his hunger pangs. His big, impressive eyes broke the audience's hearts. One man in the audience could endure it no longer. He suddenly stood up and walked toward the stage, and as he walked he said at the top of his lungs: "My dear Yankl [a diminutive of Jacob], that daughter of yours, that evil woman . . . you see now, that you won't get anything to eat from her today. She truly has a stone instead of a heart. Spit on her, Yankl, and come to me! My woman will give you a dinner that will be a pleasure. Come, Yankl! Let her choke, that awful woman, your daughter. Come to me!"¹⁷

Even if the story is apocryphal, it paints a telling portrait of an attitude towards the naiveté of American Yiddish audiences at the turn of the century. On the one hand, it shows theatregoers unable to confine the stage reality to the stage. On the other hand, those same audiences have a personal investment in the play; the outraged audience member in this story not only refers to the actor by his real name, but by a nickname, and offers his home as an alternative to

the unsatisfactory home portrayed in the theatre.

No such outlet exists in the script, where events get worse before they get better. Moyshe Khosid now spends most of his time drinking, and draws an explicit parallel between religion and drunkenness:

I'm better off sitting in the synagogue all the time, where I get a little whiskey here and there. And there is indeed whiskey in the synagogue. Someone finishes a tractate of the Talmud and there's a celebration--and you drink whiskey. It's the anniversary of someone's father's death--there's whiskey. The rabbi's wife gave birth--take out the whiskey. Some Hasid smacked his Mrs.--another whiskey.

For Moyshe, Jewish ceremony--pious or decidedly impious--provides countless excuses for going on a life-long drunk.

Moyshe's inebriation also allows him to drop the decorum demanded between men and women by Orthodox Judaism. Upon entering the house, he says to his sister in-law, "Etele! If you were a tefillin bag, I'd give you a kiss." The item in question holds prayer phylacteries; like other sacred objects, it is customary to kiss it when taking it out and when putting it away. Moyshe not only encroaches on the acceptable boundaries of behavior with another man's wife, but does so in a way that equates her with an inanimate object while it juxtaposes religious and sexual activity. This comment reinforces the sense that for all his religiosity, Moyshe has strayed far from the spirit of Judaism.

Shamay's aside after Moyshe's remark suggests the latter's gluttony as well: "But if she were a bread, you would eat her up." Shamay makes wisecracks like this throughout the

play; he acts as a Fool figure, but with commentary less oblique than that of Shakespeare's Fool. Leonard Prager notes, "In its Jewish allusiveness, its irony and proverb-lore, Shammai's language displays the liveliness of popular Yiddish, itself the embodiment of a distinct culture. . . . Shammai's Yiddish-speaking audiences reveled in the rich folk flavor of his utterances, through which he became an especially sympathetic jester."¹⁸ The combination of Shamay's loyalty--borrowed from Kent--and his sarcasm gives him a choric function, helping the audience distinguish right from wrong.

Dovid, however, does not have the benefit of hearing Shamay's asides. While he realizes that Kharif and Etele have wronged him, he still fails to see Taybele's goodness. She is studying to be a doctor--a route that, to her father, violates a woman's role in a manner tantamount to rejecting Judaism. Yaffe again alludes to Shakespeare in order to chastise Dovid for being so obtuse:

You are all good and pious until it comes to your pockets! But you, intelligent Reb Dovidl, you still do not want to open your eyes and see who is really true to you? You still play the role of King Lear and don't see what a true friend you drive away from you?

Act II closes with a moment worthy of the fall of a Shakespearean king, part Richard II and part Lear. Dovid argues with Kharif over who is master of the house, and concludes:

The Russian courts allow one to take back what one has given away, but Dovid Moyshelles does not permit one to

take back what he has given. You are the masters; you have the right to suck our blood, you have the right to let us die of hunger! Dovid Moyshesles regrets nothing. My word is dearer to me than 300,000 roubles, dearer than Avrom Kharif and his wisdom, learning, and piety, so take your key, master! (27)

The act ends with Dovid lamenting the older children's pettiness and crying, "Water! Water! Can I get a bit of water in my own house?! Water!" He collapses as the others cry, "Father! Father!" Here, Gordin drops the polemics and pedantry to create a moment of human pathos: an old man reduced to begging for water in what used to be his home.

Act III opens five years later with Kharif and Etele counting the money in their bulging bank accounts. Just in case Taybele tries to claim her inheritance, Kharif has temporarily signed over all his assets to his brother. His wife kisses him for his shrewdness, and exits; he sits down to study Gemora, a book of Biblical commentary. Again, the juxtaposition underscores Kharif's false piety; his casual transition from cheating someone to studying a holy text indicates that he does not take Jewish ethics to heart. Furthermore, his cleverness is as superficial as his false piety, for his wife's betrayal of her sisters should have taught him that siblings cannot necessarily be trusted.

Shamay continues to complain of hunger, and lies down to take a nap, muttering, "Dear God, allow me at least one miracle: let me dream that I'm eating." He does not get much chance to dream, though, for Taybele soon enters and wakes him. He tells her how things have deteriorated: "The old

mistress is sick and weak, poor thing, and he [Dovid] cannot see any more. A curtain has been drawn over his eyes as over the Holy Ark." Gordin uses an apt metaphor for transplanting Lear's blindness to the Jewish milieu. Dovid's literal blindness, like Lear's, parallels the stunted moral vision that kept him from distinguishing truth from flattery, but Gordin conveys this through quintessentially Jewish imagery. The Ark holds the Torah, the foundation of Jewish law and knowledge. So the curtain, as Shamay describes it, covers Dovid's eyes, and figuratively conceals the Torah--and by extension, the understanding of what is right--from him.

Taybele conceals herself when her parents approach, and she hears her father tell Shamay how much he loved her. Dovid underscores the connection between physical and moral vision:

I'll never be able to see her again! For me, the light is extinguished forever. I thought that I saw and understood better than the rest of the world, so God made me blind; I thought that I was smarter than everyone else, so God made me a fool; now all I see before me is my own inner world. The outer world is lost to me forever.

Dovid's moral vision is now half restored; he recognizes those who are false to him, but still puts Taybele in this category. When she asks him to teach her how to regain his love, he spurns her, saying, "You are all false, you all love only yourselves, you think yourselves smarter than your blind old father!"

The family situation further deteriorates when Moyshe Khosid and other Hasidim threaten Kharif and laugh at Dovid's

blindness. Yaffe enters and excoriates them, but when Dovid again refuses his and Taybele's offer of help, Yaffe again refers to Shakespeare: "Oh Lear! Lear! Jewish King Lear! It's not for nothing that you come from a nation long known as a stiff-necked people. Reb Dovidl, follow me, come with me." But Dovid again refuses, and asks only that Shamay be brought to him. The others go, and Dovid tells his faithful servant that they will leave the house, which is no longer their home.

In his final speech of Act III, Dovid assumes the mantle Yaffe has placed on him:

Shamay! Yaffe the teacher calls me the Jewish King Lear.
Ha, ha! Respect for the king! Make way for the king!
Viyat for the new blind beggar! Give alms to the Jewish
King Lear! Alms! Alms!

In a way, Dovid relishes his outcast status, for he remarks over and over again that it is just what he deserves. He has told Yaffe, "I became what I was supposed to become. Nothing happens by accident."

Mirroring the opening of the play, Act IV also opens with preparations for a ceremony, this time the wedding of Yaffe and Taybele. Kharif and Etele arrive first and offer Yaffe a watch, which he refuses. Instead, he says, they should give Taybele her share of the inheritance so she can build a hospital, but Kharif now plays his trump card and announces that he has signed everything over to his brother. Yaffe, enraged, sends them away. Gordin uses fundamental, uncontroversial images to indicate the moral status of his characters. Who would deprive an elderly couple of food, or

prevent the construction of a hospital? Tigers, not daughters.

When the one element missing from the wedding, the father of the bride, comes tapping at the window, Taybele welcomes him warmly. He assures her that she was uppermost in his thoughts all the time. The rest of the family welcomes him back--even Khane-Leye, whom he abandoned, but who says nothing on that score.¹⁹ Gitele and Taybele kiss and make up. Kharif and Etele soon return as well, and now comes their turn to have nowhere to go, for Kharif's brother has taken everything. However, Yaffe receives a letter stating that the brother has been arrested and that Dovid will recover all his assets. Dovid announces that all the children will get their share again--some people never learn--and concludes, "Live happily. Only unity and peace should flourish among you. Everyone say 'Amen!'" And they reply, "Amen!"

With all the parallels between Gordin's play and Shakespeare's, Gordin departs most radically from his source in his use of the happy ending (though not so great a departure from the way it was most often performed well into the nineteenth century, in Nahum Tate's 1681 adaptation, The History of King Lear). In fact, Gordin's play ends with a wedding, that festival so commonly a part of a comic ending. Nobody dies here, and even Dovid's blindness, Yaffe tells us, can probably be cured with a simple operation. Ultimately, then, no one in the play has suffered any irreparable loss.

Prager provides a compelling reason for the need for such an ending for Gordin's audience:

Many [immigrants] faced difficulties in observing rituals and following precepts which had been second-nature in the Old World. In many families children initiated their parents into American ways and were, in effect, their parents' teachers and guides. This reversal of roles must have stimulated considerable anxiety, increasing fears of dependency which economic uncertainty further aggravated. Gordin's The Jewish King Lear symbolically sanctions the new pattern of dependency and reassures the parents that the most modernist of their children will prove the most reliable. The children who have availed themselves of the new dispensation will be their parents' eyes in the confusing transition world. There will be an abundance of koylitch for those parents who accept the new mgilla.²⁰

Gordin uses the Lear legend to tell his audience a story of family strife and political conflict, but Shakespeare's bleak ending does not suit his agenda. In both The Jewish King Lear and its companion drama, Mirele Efros, Gordin reassures his audience that they can bear whatever strain the move to a new world may place on them.

The Jewish King Lear's greatest weakness lies not in its happy ending, but in the fact that Gordin does not show us how the play gets there. We have nothing like a scene on the heath to show the Jewish King Lear's change of heart; Gordin describes all of these changes after the fact, as Shamay and his master describe Dovid's heartache to Taybele:

SHAMAY: Of whom did he speak during the long winter nights, if not of you? Your name never left his kosher lips.

DOVID: It's true, Taybele! I wasn't able not to love you. Even when I drove you away from me, my heart was filled with love for you. And all the while I thought, "When will the happiest day finally come, when I will be able to see my Taybele?" And when the world became dark,

the light faded from my eyes, one figure always stood before me, consoled me, and brought me back to myself; that was the figure of my child Taybele . . .

The drama of The Jewish King Lear lies in the rupture and reconciliation of the family; Gordin does not show the audience the psychological struggles beneath these events.

Whatever its flaws, The Jewish King Lear was received enthusiastically. The Yiddish press in New York was in its infancy; the one newspaper review of the play called it "truly a flower in the Yiddish arts," and predicted, "this play by the talented Jacob Gordin will stay in the Yiddish repertoire forever."²¹ Actor Boaz Young's description makes this optimistic prognosis understandable:

Shakespeare's "King Lear," which Jacob Gordin changes into an old Jewish father, played by Jacob P. Adler, who lives in an ordinary Jewish home and wears a Hasidic coat with a fur hat on his head instead of a crown, was on the lips of all classes of Jews in New York.

Fathers brought their children to the theatre so they could take example; hundreds of thank-you letters came to Adler from Jewish mothers: their Shloymes and Moyshes had become better children since they saw the play, they wrote. . . .

"King Lear" played for awhile with the greatest success.²²

Young adds that while some critics damned the play as among Gordin's weakest, it helped herald the "Golden Epoch" in the Yiddish theatre.²³ Gordin's second adaptation of King Lear would crown the height of that era.

Jacob Gordin's Mirele Efros, originally billed as The Jewish Queen Lear, or Mirele Efros, opened on 19 August 1898 at the Thalia Theatre in New York City. Gordin wrote the role of Mirele for Keni Liptzin (c. 1856-1918), one of the

outstanding actresses of the Yiddish theatre of her day. Born in Zhitomir, Ukraine, Liptzin joined an itinerant company of Yiddish actors around 1881 and performed with them in various cities in Russia and Poland. After Tsar Alexander III banned such performances in 1882, she moved to London, where she performed with other Yiddish actors who had to move west in order to practice their profession. She soon moved from supporting to leading roles, and was a prominent member of the company that Jacob Adler brought from London to the United States in 1887.

Jacob Gordin reportedly first saw Liptzin perform in the early 1890s in New York, and was chagrined that such talent was wasted in shund roles. When Gordin adapted Goldfadn's operetta The Days of the Messiah in 1892, he added a role specifically for her. He would soon keep her in mind for major roles in his own plays as well, including The Lithuanian Luria Brothers (1894) and the title role in The Wild Princess: or, Medea's Youth (1897), which he wrote after seeing her in a Yiddish translation of Franz Grillparzer's Medea in 1896.

In Keni Liptzin, Gordin found as fervent a disciple as he had in Jacob Adler. Adler had been Gordin's only supporter in the playwright's fights with the cast of Siberia to have his dialogue performed as written. Gordin had essentially won that battle by 1898, and he certainly did not have to argue with Liptzin, to whom his text was sacrosanct. Playwright Leon Kobrin recalls in his memoirs an incident that

illustrates how seriously she took the task of acting in a Gordin drama:

It was at one of her performances of Mirele Efros at the Thalia Theatre. Kessler played Yosele.

I arrive backstage after the second act and encounter a scandal. Kessler-Yosele omitted something from his role when he was on the stage with her earlier.

Mirele Efros-Liptzin was unhappy, banged her cane on the floor backstage and screamed hysterically at Kessler: "You're not acting in a Professor Hurwitz play, Kessler! Every word is holy, one must not leave out a single letter, a single period. . . ."

Meanwhile, her husband Michael Mintz stands there grinding his teeth, casting angry glances at Kessler and murmuring under his breath, "Charlatan! Charlatan!" And he tries to calm his Keni.

Kessler . . . looks at them with his expressive eyes, and his entire face--a strong work of nature, without artifice--is a healthy, good-natured and derisive smile.

Then he lets out a roar in his basso voice--"Gee! Oho!"--he bursts out laughing and speaks with cutting mockery in his voice, and the laughter dances in his eyes as he says, "That's right, Mire-nun-nun-yu! That's right, Efrosu-nyu! Right, right, right!" All of a sudden he starts to make drum noises with his lips, and in case that wasn't enough, beats in time with his feet as well. And he brings a hand to his mouth and trumpets Yosele's line as loudly as only he could and ends with a cluck of his tongue: "You see? My pig's head remembers Yossenyu's prose!"

"I beg of you, Kessler," Liptzin calls out with entreaty in her voice, "what do you want from my life?"

"Who needs your life, it can go to hell," he snaps back with laughing eyes, "Nu, nu, sha! That's all right! Tomorrow I'll bark out two times the lines from Yosele's prose that I left out today. You see? Sha-a!"

And he graciously took her hand and went off to his dressing-room.

"Charlatan!" murmurs Michael Mintz and grinds his teeth, following him with his angry eyes.

"Oh, to act with him," groans Liptzin, "what's Gordin to him? Doesn't he understand what Gordin is?"

"He should play a coachman, not Yosele!" Michael Mintz pipes in.

That is how Liptzin protected Gordin's 'prose.'²⁴

As influential as Gordin had already become, his dialogue still needed "protecting" as of 1898. Mirele Efros, however,

would strengthen the hand of Gordin and his disciples.

By billing Mirele as the Jewish Queen Lear, Gordin alluded not only to Shakespeare, but to his own previous adaptation of Shakespeare's play, as a contemporary reviewer observed: "'The Jewish Queen Lear' forces us, through its name alone, to compare it to the 'Jewish King Lear,' by the same author."²⁵ It was Gordin who helped introduce Shakespeare to Yiddish theatregoers in 1892, so that by 1898 they had encountered at least a plot outline of King Lear. Mirele Efros resembles King Lear only in a few vague aspects, and unlike The Jewish King Lear, Gordin makes no reference in Mirele Efros to his Shakespearean source. Kalmen Marmor observes that Mirele's focus differs from The Jewish King Lear and Shakespeare's Lear. "There the emphasis is placed on the ungratefulness of children, and here on mother-love."²⁶ What makes Mirele Efros a better play than The Jewish King Lear are subtler conflicts, more believable characters, and a further distancing from Yiddish theatre's roots in operetta.

Like The Jewish King Lear, Mirele Efros opens with preparations for one ceremony and ends thirteen years later with another, but the first scene of the latter play departs from the testing pattern laid out in King Lear. Instead of placing all the antagonism to the Lear figure in two ungrateful children and their spouses, Gordin adds grovelling in-laws to the equation. Mirele Efros, a prosperous widow from the city of Grodno, has arrived with her family and

servants in the town of Slutsk for the marriage of her elder son, Yosele, to Sheyndele, a girl from a poor family. Although Yosele had wanted a bride from a cosmopolitan, urban family, Mirele insisted on the present arrangement, and Mirele's word, according to her servants Shalmon and Makhele, is law.

As the curtain goes up, coachmen carry boxes into a richly furnished room, and then Makhele provides rather heavy-handed exposition, describing the family, the journey from Grodno, the rainy weather, and some significant points about Mirele's character. Shalmon also helps with the preparations, and when he is alone, admits to having pocketed some of the expenses for the journey, but points out that Mirele always forgives such moral lapses. Unlike Shakespeare's Kent and the Shamay of the earlier Gordin Lear play, Shalmon is not completely trustworthy. Mirele's ability to forgive his flaws makes her a less rigid boss than Dovid Moyshelles--though she is plenty tough, as subsequent events will show--and accords with her noble character.

Other characters also try to exploit Mirele's generosity. Nakhuntse and Khane-Dvoyre, the bride's parents, demand money even though Mirele has already sent them two hundred rubles to cover wedding expenses. At first, Mirele refuses to see her in-laws to be. When she finally arrives, she walks with a cane, which she sometimes bangs on the floor to emphasize a point, and though her hair is gray, her face radiates

youthfulness. Her first onstage line--she previously called Makhele from offstage--quickly gives us a sense of some of the salient points of her character. Khane-Dvoyre says to her, "It's raining today. Rain is a good omen." Mirele retorts, "Yes, rain is a sure omen that there will be mud."²⁷ We immediately see her sarcasm, wit, and sense of superiority over these provincial peasants.

Mirele initially wanted Yosele to marry a girl from a poor but dignified family in order to spread the Efros fortune, but the more she sees of Slutsk, the less she can contain her aristocratic contempt. When she gets her in-laws alone, the first thing she asks them is, "You couldn't find a worse quarter of town for us to stay in?" They assure her that she has the nicest lodgings in town; indeed, she is staying in a building owned by a very wealthy man. They also continually remind her of their daughter's yikhes, or pedigree; since she is the great-granddaughter of a rabbi, says her father, "All of Slutsk puts her on a pedestal." Mirele sarcastically responds, "All of Slutsk? I don't understand at all why your town is called Slutsk. It's really Chelm, in my opinion, Chelm." Mirele's reference is pregnant with the folklore of Jewish geography:

Chelm has a niche of its own in Jewish folklore and humor because of the reputed naiveté of its inhabitants. . . . "Chelm" has become a byword for an assembly of simpletons, and the "Chelmer" (person from Chelm) for the simpleton. The dilemmas which arise and the solutions arrived at are both comic and unrealistic, generally involving questions of practical and theoretical wisdom in which the Chelmer is invariably expected to be out of

his depth.²⁸

By saying that Slutsk looks to her like Chelm, she indirectly calls her in-laws idiots in a way that draws upon Yiddish folklore.

After dropping some hints about their poverty, Khane-Dvoyre refuses to leave Mirele until she gets three hundred more rubles. She tells her husband, in Mirele's presence, "After the wedding, they'll take our Sheyndele and leave us our poverty. Now, before the wedding, we can negotiate everything." Mirele cannot stand such crassness, and calls off the wedding. "The apple does not fall far from the tree," she reasons. "On such a tree can grow a terrible apple." She dismisses Makhele's entreaty that perhaps the match has been pre-ordained by God on the grounds that a petty match could not be made in Heaven. But when she breaks the news to Yosele, he tells her that he has his heart set on the marriage, and his tears move her to command that the wedding be held immediately.

By doing so, Mirele breaks with tradition. The bride and groom customarily fast on the wedding day, and while Mirele acknowledges that this deviation from custom is no small matter, she says she will take the sin upon herself. B. Feigenbaum, reviewing the play for the Abend-blatt, found this to be one of the few "flecks on the sun" of an otherwise magnificent production: "It is not possible that even a Mirele could so easily persuade the Slutskers to put up a wedding

canopy without the preparations that the Jewish world simply requires."²⁹ That such a detail strained the reviewer's credulity indicates the boldness with which Gordin conceived his heroine. He wanted to create a woman whose strength would supercede some of the customary requirements of Judaism itself--though, as in The Jewish King Lear, only insofar as they stay in line with the spirit of the religion.

Gordin may even have wanted to endow Mirele with some of the traits of an earthly goddess. Her first contact with the audience is as a disembodied voice, as she calls for Makhele from her room. Every time Shalmon is about to see Mirele, the stage directions call for him to button up his jacket--a secular equivalent of covering one's head in the presence of one's Creator. While Nakhuntse and Khane-Dvoyre make their petty demands, Makhele, fearful of Mirele's wrath, intercedes: "Don't be offended by them--they don't understand you." This entreaty is not unlike Abraham pleading for the lives of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, or Jesus' famous plea, "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). While Gordin's audience may not have been familiar with the latter quotation, they would recognize the common Biblical situation of intervention by a good person on behalf of ignorant sinners. Makhele draws a more direct parallel between Mirele and God a bit later. When Mirele lays down the law to her new daughter-in-law, she concludes, "One must honor one's elders. But you needn't be afraid, I'm not a bad

woman." To which Makhele adds, "Oy, bad--if only God were that bad to his people Israel." Mirele, like God, is firm but fair (indeed, her one rule derives from the Decalogue). To her servant, Mirele's reign appears more tolerant than that of God Himself.

Act I ends with the families and their guests going out to the wedding ceremony, but before they do, Mirele reminds them of one who is conspicuously absent: her late husband. She asks Yosele to say the prayer "El moleh rakhamim" in his father's memory, and as he does so, she cries.³⁰ All the guests cry during this as well--as did, undoubtedly, a great many in the audience who would have been touched by the scene. One of the most widely known Jewish wedding customs is the breaking of a glass under the wedding canopy, signaling, among other things, the reminder of future sorrows as well as joys. Since Gordin puts this wedding offstage, the prayer for the dead before the ceremony is a dramaturgic breaking of the glass, a reminder that life has its sorrows as well as its joys. The act ends with the musicians playing a freylekhs--a happy, upbeat melody--so that the act ends on a bittersweet note.

Act II picks up three years later in Mirele's beautifully furnished house in Grodno. The extended family lives in Mirele's house, and Sheyndele has become a shrew. Mirele puts up with her daughter in-law's pettiness for the sake of Yosele, who is too weak to stand up to his wife. When Makhele

asks her mistress why she allows Sheyndele so much power, Mirele explains, "Makhele, a person is strong not just by making others do what he wants. It also takes strength to make oneself do what another wants."

Act II also follows up on Shalmon's petty embezzlements. Sheyndele and her parents berate Mirele for allowing him to remain in charge of the household accounts. Since their fortune is now tied to Mirele's, they argue that he is stealing from them. However, Mirele's attitude is more liberal: "Yes, he is a thief! And who among you is not a thief? In his place, wouldn't Nakhum, Khane-Dvoyre's husband, steal? He wouldn't have the sense to run a business, but he'd quickly learn how to steal . . . Shalmon has taken what I've allowed him to take."

Mirele's children are no Regan and Goneril--and no Etele and Gitele, for that matter. They are not so brazenly ungrateful, but merely weak and selfish. In Act II, they show their shortcomings not by denying their mother anything to eat, but by succumbing to Sheyndele's tyranny. Donye, the younger brother, also shows a nascent break with tradition in his costume; he appears in modern dress rather than in traditional Jewish clothes. The act's climactic moment comes when Sheyndele petitions Mirele to give her sons their share of their inheritance. But Mirele has a surprise for them all. Her husband, it turns out, died bankrupt. It was she who built up the family fortune, and, being a shrewd

businesswoman, she has the books to prove it. Her sons' share, therefore, would be nothing without her. Nevertheless, as the rest of the family begins to retreat with their tails between their legs, she calls them back:

You want to be in charge? You feel unhappy now? Good, I don't want to ruin your lives. My joy is that you should feel joyous; and if you're happy, I'm happy. Tomorrow morning I will turn all the books over to you, and the documents, and everything that's here in the box . . . go and sleep soundly! Good night.

After they leave, she paces the room absorbed in thought, opens a prayer book, and starts to chant a psalm. But she soon puts her head down on her book and cries bitterly as Makhele wipes away her tears.

Clearly, Mirele's dividing of the legacy is not the foolish act of a Lear or a Dovid Moyshes. It is a reaction to the greed of her children, a chance to teach them a lesson. It is also the act of what will, in later American-Jewish folklore, come to be the archetypal Jewish mother: the woman who will sacrifice everything for her children's happiness, but who will not refrain from making them feel guilty in the process.

The characters' physical conditions mark the changes that have occurred in Mirele's house by the time the curtain goes up on Act III. Nakhuntse returns drunk from a botched business trip--he has replaced Shalmon as family manager--and falls asleep in a chair. Mirele cannot sleep, a condition that marks her own fall from power: "He sleeps soundly and I don't sleep all night . . . I can find no place for myself,

for I have nothing to do." Makhele enters crying; Sheyndele has told her to leave the household. We see signs of the sons' departure from Jewishness in their costumes: Yosele in modern dress and Donye dressed "like a dandy." The proper order of things--sobriety, a good night's sleep, and Jewish clothing--has been disrupted by the usurpation of Mirele's authority and the rejection of her love.

The disarray of the family finances further underscores the decay of the House of Efros. Nakhuntse has brought back a huge order of ruined flax that has cost the family eight thousand rubles. Sheyndele and Yosele suspect that Donye has embezzled family funds on his business trips. One sign of Mirele's capability as matriarch was her financial skill. When she was in charge, the family prospered and could even afford for the servant to skim a little off the funds. When her children try to run the household, it leads to mismanagement and squabbling.

Such discord ultimately breaks up the family. The final straw for the Efros family comes when Shalmon enters with a delegation trying to collect funds to build a new hospital--an echo of Taybele's aspirations in The Jewish King Lear. Mirele promises them money, but Sheyndele controls the pursestrings, and prevents Yosele from giving any money to charity. In both plays, Gordin uses the same indisputably noble goal--the construction of a hospital--to show how the characters line up morally. Characters with their values intact support the

hospital (in this way, Shalmon redeems himself), while those with skewed values block its creation. The other major characters, especially Dovid Moyshes and Yosele Efros, are hindered by one weakness or another from helping the good deed come to fruition.

The quarrel over the hospital catalyzes Mirele's decision to leave her son's house and take up Shalmon's offer to house her and Makhele. Sheyndele tearfully apologizes while Yosele cries for his mother, but the strong-willed matriarch shows no sign of being moved by their entreaties. When Act IV begins, Mirele has not visited her children in the ten years since she left the house. As in The Jewish King Lear, the opening of Act IV parallels that of Act I with the preparation for a family ritual, this time the bar mitzvah of Yosele and Sheyndele's son Shloymele (this is a family rich in diminutives).

A few key differences in the structure of the plays' final acts indicate how much Gordin has learned about playwriting in the intervening six years. First of all, when he shows Mirele refusing Yosele's entreaty to attend the bar mitzvah, he gives her a chance to explain her reasons. We learn that she also refused to attend Donye's wedding some years earlier, thus giving us a sense of the continual tension the family has endured over the last decade. And Mirele Efros does not suffer from either physical or moral blindness. Unlike Dovid, whose servant brings him to his daughter's

wedding, Mirele ultimately makes the decision to attend her grandson's bar mitzvah on her own. When Shloymele learns that all other pleas to her have failed, he displays the Efros spirit by thrice announcing to his father, "She will come with me." Before he goes, Shloymele adds, "I'm not a person who speaks foolishness. When I say that I'll bring her, I'll bring her." And he does. This time, Gordin does not try to erase all the problems that have affected the family by sending a happy ending through the mail. In The Jewish King Lear, Gordin restored the family finances and held out the promise of restoring Dovid's sight. He need not bring about so drastic a change this time. Mirele's arrival at the bar mitzvah does not mean the family will always be happy; it means only that they have taken one step towards reconciliation.

Critics received the premiere of Mirele Efros with enthusiasm bordering on disbelief that such an impressive production could happen in the Yiddish theatre. Playwright and critic Leon Kobrin, writing in the Arbeter tsaytung, contrasted what he saw as the artistic achievement of the play with the rowdy behavior of a typical Yiddish audience:

To tell you the truth, as I sat in the Thalia Theatre yesterday, I forgot that I was sitting in a Yiddish theatre in America. It seemed to me that I was in Russia in a Russian theatre, and that legitimate actors were performing a legitimate play for me. From time to time I was brought back to reality by the whining of a child or the pop of a seltzer-bottle stopper . . . but that was soon forgotten because of the interesting contents of the play and the natural performances of the actors.³¹

With Mirele Efros, Gordin was emerging more clearly than ever as the Yiddish theatre's "highbrow" playwright, whose work seemed out of place before such "lowbrow" audience behavior.

Given the perceived dichotomy between the artistic level of the play and the crudeness of the audience, critics repeatedly impressed upon their readers the "duty" of spreading the news of Gordin's achievement. In Kobrin's words,

'The Jewish Queen Lear' is truly a happy event for our impoverished stage, and I think that it is the duty of every intelligent person interested in the Yiddish theatre, and who cherishes Yiddish literature and art, to express his opinion about [the play].³²

B. Feygenbaum of the Abend-blatt echoed Kobrin's opinion, adding that Mirele had the potential to transform Yiddish theatregoers: "It is the duty of everyone who is serious about the spiritual development of the Jewish masses to 'push' this play as strongly as possible."³³ Such a comment would have been particularly gratifying to Gordin, who took his self-appointed role of mentor to the masses so seriously.

While the critics showed little faith in the audience's ability to appreciate Gordin's artistry, they acknowledged that the play had something to offer even the most unsophisticated audience member. As Feygenbaum put it, the play "can delight even the simple theatregoer, who does not yet understand its art, since the plot alone is quite suspenseful."³⁴ For Moyshe Katz of the Forverts, the play's ability to entertain different sorts of audiences turned it

into a potential weapon in an aesthetic war; the "enthusiasm with which the audience greeted the play" encouraged him that Gordin might be the playwright who could single-handedly drive shund melodramas and operettas from the Yiddish stage.³⁵

What distinguished Mirele in the eyes of the critics were both a greater degree of realism, at all levels of the production, and a greater unity among the actors and the other components of the production, than they had ever seen before on the Yiddish stage. Most dazzling of all was Keni Liptzin's performance; Feygenbaum raved that she

performs like a true artist, in the full sense of the word, not measured only by the lowly standard of the Yiddish theatre. I am certain that she would have caused a furor on the stages of the best Gentile theatres. This is the first time that I have seen such acting in the Yiddish theatre.³⁶

Katz specified what made Liptzin's performance so extraordinary: her complete immersion into the character, her ability to show "what is happening in Mirele's soul."³⁷ He was impressed not just by her delivery of the lines, but by what she did before and after she delivered them. Katz found her in character from the moment she set foot on stage to the moment she exited--an observation that implies that most other Yiddish actors at the time got into character just in time to deliver their lines and then went back to being themselves when their dialogue was done. Liptzin was different: "Throughout almost her whole performance, I did not see her as an actress on the stage, but as Mirele Efros."³⁸

The critics admired several of the other performances as

well, especially those of Samuel Tornberg as Nakhuntse and Morris Moskowitz as Shalmon. Katz remarked upon the ability of both actors to remain, like Liptzin, completely in character at all moments, noting that Moskowitz was "not theatrical even for half a second," and never looked directly at the audience.³⁹ However, some of the performances bore more than a trace of the broader acting style that prevailed in the Yiddish theatre at the time. Katz regretted that an actress as talented as Dina Feinman came across as "so theatrical in many places" in her portrayal of Sheyndele, often raising her hand to emphasize a point and falling into the "declamatory art of ending a monologue," which undermined the realism of her performance.⁴⁰ Katz found the theatricality of Mary Epstein's performance as Makhele even more jarring:

It would be better if Makhele did not speak, as she does at times, to the audience. How could Makhele, sitting in Mirele's house, know that there is an audience in the theatre? Her awareness of the audience reminds the audience that someone is playing the role of Makhele, but it would be better for us to see Makhele herself.⁴¹

In short, several of the performances in Mirele Efros attained a degree of consistency that the critics had seldom or never seen in the Yiddish theatre, but those accomplishments also served to underscore the moments in the production that exhibited vestiges of the more typical Yiddish acting style.

Both Mirele Efros and The Jewish King Lear became even more to the Yiddish theatre than staples of its repertoire; they became the stuff of theatrical folklore as well. Years

after the plays premiered, the satirical journal Der groyser kundes printed cartoons based on scenes from each play to comment on contemporary situations involving the actors who first brought Dovid Moyshelles and Mirele Efros to life. In 1909, when the management of the Grand Theatre terminated Jacob Adler's lease to turn the theatre into a movie house, the Kundes pointed out the parallel to Dovid Moyshelles' exile in a cartoon entitled, "A Moving Picture" (Fig. 1). With the Grand Theatre in the background advertising "moving pictures" in Yiddish, Adler as the blind and barefoot Dovid Moyshelles goes into exile. The caption has Adler "as King Lear" tell his servant, "Shamay, Shamay, lead me! With a few hundred thousand dollars and with the help of good people, we will make a living wherever we go!"⁴² The cartoon acknowledges the aptness of its own analogy only up to a point; part of the humor lies in how far the prosperous manager Adler is from Dovid Moyshelles' severe state of poverty.

In 1911, the Kundes similarly caricatured Mirele Efros, this time in a situation involving a production of the play. The occasion was the American tour of Esther-Rokhl Kaminska, perhaps the foremost actress of the Polish Yiddish theatre at the time. Kaminska had performed in the United States before, but never as Mirele, a role that won her acclaim in Warsaw. In the fall of 1911, however, she dared to bring her Mirele to the country where Keni Liptzin had held a monopoly on the part ever since the play's premiere in 1898. The cartoon (Fig. 2)

Fig. 2



showed Liptzin as Mirele, stick in hand, pointing to a similarly costumed Kaminska and complaining, "Shalmon, Shalmon! Look who is coming to take my place!"⁴³

Regardless of Kaminska's talent, however, Liptzin's place as Mirele was not about to be threatened after thirteen years in a role that she would ultimately claim to have performed over fifteen hundred times.⁴⁴ Abraham Cahan admired the touches of realism Kaminska added to the role, but found that the "so-called classical" Mirele of Keni Liptzin "made a stronger impression" than the Mirele of Kaminska's "more modern, more realistic school." He suggested a reason for his preference:

Mrs. Liptzin's Mirele is not a Jewish woman. Her pride, her good-natured humor, her dominant spirit, her practical intellect--all of that smacks not of Lithuania, but of Shakespeare. She is not proud like one of our Jewish women, but with the pride of a King Lear.⁴⁵

When Mirele Efros premiered, B. Feygenbaum praised it for being "a Jewish play in the fullest sense of the word. Everything in it, every detail, is specifically Jewish, and relates to Jewish life and conditions in Russia."⁴⁶ One generation later, Cahan was down-playing the play's Jewishness in order to claim for it the status of a classic. However, audience taste would run in the opposite direction: the more a Yiddish version of Shakespeare related the play to Jewish life, the more enthusiastically the American Yiddish audience would tend to receive it.

The critical and commercial success of Mirele Efros

served both to consolidate Gordin's power in Yiddish theatre circles and to add to his prestige. Theatre historian Bernard Gorin uses Gordin's two versions of Lear to assess the phases in the playwright's career:

A new era in his creativity begins with Mirele Efros. The basis of Mirele Efros is the same as of The Jewish King Lear--both are based on Shakespeare's famous tragedy--but how great is the leap from Lear to Mirele Efros! In Lear one can see how the playwright is afraid to take a step alone and clings the whole time to Shakespeare's skirts. But in Mirele Efros, Gordin stands on his own two feet. The action and the characters have no connection whatsoever to Shakespeare's tragedy, and the play is entirely [Gordin's] own. But that is not the main thing. In Mirele Efros, Gordin found his road. Instead of what he was to this point satisfied with doing in his dramas--depicting dramatic events that simply relate to one another--he now settled more on the psychological side of the action. In other words, instead of a grouping of dramatic situations came the development of an entire action, and with that he raised himself to a higher artistic level. And his later dramas took the new, higher form.⁴⁷

While comparing the two plays certainly illustrates the playwright's progress, the differences between them are not as drastic as Gorin makes them out to be. First of all, while Gordin reminds us of Shakespeare throughout The Jewish King Lear, he does let go of "Shakespeare's skirts" long enough to introduce action, characters, and themes of his own. Shakespeare "borrowed" stories too, of course, but one can almost hear Gorin's sigh of relief when he comes to Mirele Efros, which never explicitly evokes Shakespeare. Between the lines of Gorin's comparison lies the satisfaction he finds in Mirele Efros being able to "stand on its own" without having to acknowledge a non-Yiddish source. Nevertheless, Gorin's

assessment of the artistic distance between the two Gordin plays is basically accurate, though Lir does give the actors room to explore the psychology of their characters, and Mirele has its melodramatic moments. What had changed as much as Gordin's craftsmanship in the years between the premieres of the two plays was the American Yiddish theatre itself, and Gordin's place in it.

Like the minotaur or the satyr, those half human, half bestial creatures of Greek mythology, Gordin's Lear variations start out as a curious combination of disparate elements and ultimately become autonomous entities. To extend the metaphor, The Jewish King Lear and Mirele Efros have the innards of Shakespeare, the body of Ibsen, and distinctly Jewish faces. The fact that Gordin managed to turn such conglomerations into commercial and critical successes showed other Yiddish playwrights that Shakespeare's plays offered dramaturgic fruits ripe for the picking. The harvest began in the 1890s, and continued to feed Yiddish audiences throughout the heyday of Yiddish theatre in America.

NOTES

1. Bessie Thomashefsky, Mayn lebns-geshikhte (New York: Varhayt Publishing Company, 1916), 198-99.
2. S. Niger, Dertseylers un romanistn (New York: Central Yiddish Culture Organization, 1946), 1:198.
3. Ibid., 203.
4. Jacob Gordin, "Erinerungen fun Yankev Gordin: vi azoy bin ikh gevorn a dramaturg?" Di idishe bine, ed. Chanon Minikes (New York, 1897), 166.
5. Ibid., 167.
6. Quoted in Leon Kobrin, Erinerungen fun a idishn dramaturg (New York: Committee for Kobrin's Writings, 1925), 1:123.
7. Jacob Gordin, "Der syuzhet fun mayn tsukunftige [sic] drame," Di arbeter tsaytung, 20 May 1892.
8. Jacob Gordin, "Vi tsu farshteyn a drame," in Minikes, 77.
9. Der folksadvokat, 20 April 1894.
10. Jacob Gordin, Yokl der opern-makher, in Yankev Gordins eyn-akters (New York: Tog, 1917), 185. Subsequent quotations from the play will be cited in the text.
11. Jacob Gordin, Der yidisher kenig lir, unpaginated manuscript of 1894 in Jacob Gordin Papers, YIVO Archives. All subsequent quotations from the play come from this text. Although it cannot be traced directly to the original production script of the play, it was copied from an earlier script less than a year and a half after the first production; the title page reads: "Written for Sam Engelman . . . by Mr. Jules Firer. . . . Written the 24th of May 1894." The action in this version barely differs from the version published in Warsaw in 1907 without Gordin's permission, and all the characters are the same. However, the dialogue differs substantially in a number of places, especially in Shanay's sardonic commentary, making the language of the published version somewhat tamer than that of the manuscript.
12. Celia Adler, Tsili Adler dertseylt (New York: Tsili Adler Foundation un Bukh-Komitet, 1959), 1:107.
13. Arthur Hertzberg, The Jews in America (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 171.

14. Ruth 1:16. Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1988), 1420.
15. J. H. Hertz, ed., The Pentateuch and Haftorahs, 2nd ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1971), 525.
16. Leonard Prager, "Of Parents and Children: Jacob Gordin's The Jewish King Lear," American Quarterly 18 (1966), 510.
17. Celia Adler, 1:173.
18. Prager, 513.
19. I see no dramaturgic reason for including Khane-Leye in the play at all. Gordin seems to have created the role simply to accommodate the right number of actors.
20. Prager, 516.
21. Kritikovsky, "Klasishe trern," Di yidishe gazeten, 11 November 1892.
22. Boaz Young, Mayn lebn in teater. (New York: YKUF, 1950), 79.
23. Ibid., 80.
24. Kobrin, Erinerungen, 1:145-47.
25. Moyshe Katz, "'Di yidishe kenigin lir' oder 'Mirele Efros,'" Forverts, 28 August 1898.
26. Kalmen Marmor, Jacob Gordin (New York: YKUF, 1953), 100.
27. Jacob Gordin, Mirele Efros. Unpaginated manuscript in Jacob Gordin Papers, YIVO Archives. All subsequent quotations from the play will be cited in the text.
28. Encyclopaedia Judaica (Jerusalem: Macmillan, 1971), 5:373.
29. B. Feigenbaum, "Di 'kenigin' fun ale yidishe drames," Dos abend-blatt, 22 August 1898.
30. For more on the significance of this prayer, see Hayim Donin, To Pray as a Jew (Basic Books, 1980), 270-71, and Maurice Lamm, The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1969), 194-206.
31. Leon Kobrin, "Di idishe kenigin Lir," Di arbeter tsaytung, 21 Aug. 1898.
32. Ibid.

33. B. Feygenbaum, "Di 'kenigin' fun ale idishe drames."
34. Ibid.
35. Katz, "'Di idishe kenigin Lir.'"
36. Feygenbaum, "Di 'kenigin' fun ale idishe drames."
37. Moyshe Katz, "'Di idishe kenigin Lir' oder 'Mirele Efros'" (conclusion), Forverts, 4 Sept. 1898.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. "A Moving Picture," Der groyser kundes 1 (15 Sept. 1909), 9.
43. Der groyser kundes 3 (17 Nov. 1911), 7.
44. Zylbercweig, Leksikon, 2:1116.
45. Abraham Cahan, "Ver iz a besere 'Mirele Efros,' Madam Liptzin oder Madam Kaminska?" Forverts, 9 Dec. 1911.
46. Feygenbaum, "Di 'kenigin' fun ale idishe drames."
47. B. Gorin, Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater (New York: Literatur Farlag, 1918), 2:186.

CHAPTER 3

THOMASHEFSKY IN TIGHTS

I decided to produce Hamlet at the Thalia Theatre. Naturally, I would play Hamlet, the leading role. It was actually a daring idea. I, a young Jewish actor reared on the plays of Goldfaden, Lateiner, Zeifert, Jacob Ter--I would appear in the world-famous work Hamlet? . . . Quite a leap, from [Goldfaden's] Koldunye [and] Ni-be, ni-me, ni kukuriku to Shakespeare's Hamlet!

--Boris Thomashefsky¹

The public did not understand what "that play" Hamlet was. It was therefore a success. We performed the play for several weeks and made a brisk business, but one problem was that the audience clapped, cried, and called for the author, Shakespeare, to come and take a curtain call. My good servant, Becky, even suggested that we make up one of the actors and send him out as Shakespeare. But we begged the audience's pardon that Shakespeare did not take a curtain call. He could not come, since he lived so far away, in London.

--Bessie Thomashefsky²

In many ways, Boris Thomashefsky represented the type of theatre that Jacob Gordin sought to banish from the Yiddish stage, for Thomashefsky drew his largest crowds when performing in melodramas, "historical operas," and operettas. Nevertheless, Thomashefsky also contributed significantly to the production of Shakespeare's plays in Yiddish. He often reached out to divergent audience interests by touting both the "highbrow" and "lowbrow" features of the Shakespearean translations and adaptations in which he performed, promising colorful costumes and exciting special effects that would enliven the "art" and "poetry" of the productions. Celia Adler saw this tendency to play both sides of the aesthetic fence as quintessential Thomashefsky, for:

he himself--who was scolded so much for the great quantities of foolishness with which he flooded the Yiddish theatre--almost always presented works by the most respected writers in world literature for his benefit performances.³

Thomashefsky the *matinée* idol and Thomashefsky the Shakespearean actor were one and the same, and his Shakespearean productions bore the stamp of that combination.

Borukh Aaron Thomashefsky was born into a musically talented family in Ukraine around 1868 (some sources say 1866). His grandfather was a cantor, and his father, Pinkhas, would eventually compose music for several of Boris's productions. Boris showed signs of musical talent from a young age, with both a good ear and a sweet voice. The renowned cantor Nisn Belzer, in the Ukrainian city of Berditshev, heard Thomashefsky sing and took him on as a meshoyrer [cantor's apprentice]. The prestigious position offered rigorous musical training and gave Thomashefsky his first practice at performing in public.

Meshoyrerim (the plural form of the noun) often performed secular material as well; two Romanian apprentices, for instance, "had considerable experience in the music halls, at weddings, and even in a church choir--a fact which they had carefully concealed from the chief cantor of the Bucharest synagogue."⁴ Thomashefsky went even further, not only performing outside of the synagogue, but overseeing every facet of his first production:

With the help of the smaller meshoyrerim, I built a stage in the attic of Reb Nisn's house. I used crates and

branches as the material for the stage. Old sheets, bed covers, and quilts were clumsily sewn together; this was the curtain. I wrote a play by the name of Berditshever rotakhim [Assassins of Berditshev], for which I wrote the meshoyrerim. I rehearsed the roles with my friends, the meshoyrerim. We gave performances two or three times a week.⁵

Thomashefsky says nothing about the content of the play, but the circumstances of the production resemble those of many of his later plays: his own script, lyrics, and direction, and accommodation to the most readily available theatrical space, materials, and personnel.

While Boris Thomashefsky was staging his first play, his father's friendship with three young revolutionaries was arousing the suspicion of the Czarist authorities. Boris describes sneaking off to watch the hanging of one of the young firebrands--a fate that might have befallen Pinkhas Thomashefsky had he not stayed one step ahead of the police. According to Thomashefsky, Pinkhas gathered the family and fled Kiev on the eve of his own anticipated arrest. After taking a train to Antwerp, the family sailed to New York.⁶

Shortly after arriving in New York in approximately 1881, Thomashefsky got a job singing in the Henry Street Synagogue, where he met Frank Wolf, a prosperous saloon owner. The boy dreamed of establishing a Yiddish theatre in New York, and saw Wolf as a potential backer. He told Wolf that he had met a man on the voyage to America named Avrom Golubok, who said that his two brothers in London were famous Yiddish actors. Thomashefsky claims to have convinced Wolf to raise the money

to bring Leon and Myron Golubok, as well as ten other actors, to New York, where they soon began rehearsing Goldfadn's Koldunye, or, The Witch.⁷ This assertion has been brought into question by an eyewitness account that places the Goluboks in New York already, where they were said to have performed Goldfadn's Shmendrik at the Bowery Garden, a beer saloon located at 113 1/2 Bowery, around 1881.⁸ Thomashefsky's memoirs place him in the first professional Yiddish production in the United States, at the German-owned Turn Hall on East 4th Street, probably in 1882. It is not critical for the purposes of this discussion to weigh the accuracy of these accounts, though I find Thomashefsky's suspect because of his flair for self-promotion. Yet whether or not he laid the actual cornerstone that would become the American Yiddish theatre, he certainly played a major role in building the foundation.

While Thomashefsky began making a name for himself in the 1880s as the matinee idol of the Yiddish theatre, he would eventually become one of the most important interpreters of Shakespeare on the Yiddish stage as well. His Shakespearean repertoire falls into two broad categories: versions that, however cut, retain the settings and most of the characters and action of the original; and versions that 'Judaize' the action, characters, and settings. This chapter assesses the former category, while Chapter 4 deals with the latter.

In the short time since Shakespeare's plays had begun to

appear on Yiddish stages in New York, they had also found other ways to filter into Yiddish culture. Getsl Zelikovitsh, who wrote for Di yidishe gazetn under the name "Der litvisher filosof" [The Lithuanian philosopher], often began his columns with a quotation from Shakespeare as early as January 1891. These tastes of Shakespeare blossomed into a twelve-course meal beginning in October 1893, when the same writer began a series of plot synopses of the plays. The series starts with Hamlet, preceded by a general introduction:

Reader! You have already heard enough about William Shakespeare, the prince of all Gentile poets . . . whose status no one can equal. You should also know that William Shakespeare wrote 34 plays, almost all of them still performed around the entire world, in various languages. Each of these plays has rich contents that the theatregoer often cannot follow without having prior knowledge of the plot or story on which Shakespeare based his play. We will succinctly describe the contents of almost every play, which are remarkable stories. Do not forget that this was created by Shakespeare--a man who looked into the heart of nature herself and came face-to-face with the abyss.⁹

The introduction oozes the rhetoric of bardolatry--praise of the immortal Shakespeare, indisputably the world's greatest poet and truth-seeker--as well as the Romantic notion of the individual genius who penetrates the secrets of human nature. The series goes on to summarize quite a few of Shakespeare's plays, though not as many as this passage promises, in generally reliable synopses.¹⁰

The preface also touches on an issue that has since become a commonplace in the perception of Shakespeare by American audiences in general: the difficulty of Shakespeare's

verse, and the need for preparation before attending his plays. This attitude, however, was not necessarily shared by the Yiddish theatrical community. While Zelikovitch was issuing his plot synopses, the theatres were getting embroiled in a rivalry that brought Shakespeare's plays back into the American Yiddish theatre for the first time since Gordin's Der yidisher kenig Lir, which premiered a year earlier.

Moyshe Zeifert's adaptation of Othello premiered on 20 October 1893 at the Windsor Theatre in New York. It was no coincidence that one month later, another Zeifert adaptation, this time of Hamlet, was produced at the rival Thalia Theatre. While a lack of extant texts makes it impossible to describe those productions in detail,¹¹ it is possible to make certain inferences about them based on other relevant evidence.

At the time, Boris Thomashefsky was performing at the Thalia, where Joseph Lateiner was resident playwright. Thomashefsky's chief rivals, David Kessler and Jacob Adler, performed across the street at the Windsor, where Moyshe Hurwitz reigned as house dramatist. Thomashefsky recalls with no small degree of satisfaction that the decision to stage Othello at the Windsor came about after Adler and Kessler unsuccessfully attempted to perform a Hurwitz operetta--a form despised by Adler and Kessler and dominated by Thomashefsky. After the Hurwitz play bombed, they commissioned Zeifert, a prolific journalist who had already written a few plays of his own, to adapt Othello. Thomashefsky wrote two accounts of

how this episode in the Thalia/Windsor rivalry came about. In a 1908 article, he points out that the Windsor company had to produce more plays than he did at the time, for his appearance in Lateiner's Alexander, the Crown Prince of Jerusalem, was enjoying a long run. Thomashefsky attributes the success of the play to his legs, which he says were shown to great advantage in the silk-stockinged title role. In the midst of Thomashefsky's triumph as Alexander, the Windsor company launched an attack; in the 1908 version, this comes in the form of a poster that read:

Next week, we--true, realistic artists--will present Othello, the greatest tragedy in the world . . . Such a work can only be performed by great actors; boys with their legs will not dare to touch the greatest work in the world.¹²

Thomashefsky was stunned as well as stung. A play without music, dance, or Jewish content? "Well, Shakespeare is dead already," he thought, "but kill me? I won't let them."¹³ He quickly commissioned Zeifert to adapt Hamlet, for which the payment consisted of fifteen dollars and a pass to the show for Zeifert's family. Thomashefsky then issued what he calls a "counter-poster" announcing, "Next week, Thomashefsky will present the greatest tragedy, which William Shakespeare wrote especially for Thomashefsky--Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, music by Arele Gral, dances arranged by Baraban."¹⁴

The Yiddish word to describe the claim put forth in this ad is khutspe (or chutzpah). But beneath the bald-faced lie,

there lies a grain of truth. Every great actor who ever dazzled audiences in a Shakespearean role has made the role his or her own, so that one can read of Betterton's Hamlet, Garrick's Richard III, Forrest's Othello, Ada Rehan's Rosalind, or Irving's Iago. True, the poster told a lie it could get away with only in a culture ignorant of who Shakespeare was, but why not add Thomashefsky's Hamlet to the pantheon?

Thomashefsky offers another version of these events in his memoirs, published in 1937:

One evening, my fans came running to me, all worked up: 'You know, Mr. Thomashefsky, Adler just announced from the stage that soon he will stage the world-famous, sensational tragedy by William Shakespeare, the greatest work in all of world literature, Othello. He said in his speech that he will play Othello, and Kessler will play Iago, and they will switch off in the roles . . .'

The fans also told me that Adler insulted me from the stage. He said that with a play like Othello, no one would be able to emulate him; that one must be an actor to be able to play Othello. Othello is not Alexander, the Crown Prince of Jerusalem. . . .

I impatiently waited for that act of the performance to end. When I finished, I went out in front of the curtain and announced to the public that . . . I would soon present William Shakespeare's greatest tragedy, Hamlet. I would play the role of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. The theatre was packed with Jewish men, women, and young ladies. Most of them knew as much about Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, as an Orthodox Jew knew of Gentile cooking. They figured that this was some kind of new operetta. The little fans applauded, clapping their hands and feet and banging sticks together.¹⁵

To the Thalia's audience, the title Hamlet, Prince of Denmark may have sounded like a Scandinavian transplant of Alexander, Crown Prince of Jerusalem. Given the success of the latter, no wonder they applauded so enthusiastically.

The spontaneity with which Thomashefsky says he made this announcement was commonplace in the Yiddish theatre, where the slightest hint that Troupe A had a potentially successful idea for a play would lead Troupe B to attempt to outdo it, preferably at or before the time Troupe A produced it. At times, plays with identical or nearly identical titles premiered on the same day, such as competing versions of Gasn kinder [Children of the Streets] at the Thalia and Windsor Theatres on 28 October 1898, or Uncle Tom's Cabin at both the People's and Thalia Theatres on 3 May 1901. As Thomashefsky summed it up, "If they had thunder, I had lightning. If they had snow, I had rain. . . . If someone among them killed an enemy, I killed all my enemies at once."¹⁶

Thomashefsky's accounts also illustrate how territorial these rivalries were. Typical of nineteenth-century European and American theatre, actors became known for certain "lines of business," a custom on which Adler tries to capitalize by insisting that Thomashefsky has overstepped the boundaries of his artistry. According to Thomashefsky, this insistence grew after he announced his Hamlet:

Adler was fuming: such khutspe, Thomashefsky is going to perform Hamlet at the same time that Adler plays Othello. Every evening, Adler would make a speech to his audience about his Othello. Just think; while he, Jacob P. Adler, the king of the Yiddish drama, plays Shakespeare's Othello, someone else should dare to play Hamlet! And he sought to convince the audience that they should come to his Othello, which he and Kessler were entitled to perform. But the other one, the actor from across the street, had no right to perform Shakespeare's work!¹⁷

The descriptions of the stars' announcements from the stage

reflect divergent views of their audiences' understanding of what it meant to stage a play by Shakespeare. Thomashefsky condescendingly emphasizes their overall ignorance of Hamlet-- a perception supported by Bessie Thomashefsky's story quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Adler, on the other hand, relies on unquestioning belief in both his and Shakespeare's greatness to assert that he has the talent to perform Shakespeare's roles, and that Thomashefsky's success in a "lower" theatrical form bars him from playing in the Shakespearean sandbox.

Thomashefsky's emphasis on the audience's naiveté about Shakespeare might seem at first glance to contradict Adler's attempt to appeal to the audience's sense of artistic hierarchies. What this dichotomy represents, however, is complexity rather than contradiction. Shakespeare was becoming part of the cultural discourse of the American Yiddish theatre by this time, but if one looks closely at the references to Shakespeare in both Gordin's Der yidisher kenig Lir and in Zelikovitsh's preface to his plot synopses, Yiddish audiences would have no direct indication from those sources that Shakespeare was dead. If those two sources were the most prominent references to Shakespeare in the American Yiddish culture at the time, it would be quite possible to "know" that Shakespeare was the "world's greatest playwright" without knowing that he could not make a curtain call.

For all his public bluster, Thomashefsky privately feared

that he might be out of his depth, so he hired a director from the Irving Place Theatre, then a bastion of German drama::

He simply put every word in my mouth, pointed out the meaning of the most important spots, clarified for me the ideas that Shakespeare wanted to bring out in his work. I studied my role days and nights. Seven o'clock in the morning, when all the other actors were still sleeping, I was in the theatre shortly after breakfast, studying with Herr Walter. He measured every step that I had to take, showed me the tone of every word, every passage. He taught me where to remain calm, and on the other hand, where I should be tempestuous, enraged, etc.

Walter also helped me order the necessary clothes, wigs, and other appropriate things. My colleagues, the actors, had a hell of a time learning their roles. Not one of them understood a single line. They complained, 'What does Shakespeare want from us?'

Every rehearsal of Hamlet lasted three or four hours longer than our usual rehearsals.¹⁸

Hiring a director from outside was an unusual step. The extra precautions show that even though, according to Thomashefsky, Zeifert translated the play literally overnight, the actor was sufficiently impressed by the enormity of performing Shakespeare--or even the shadow of Shakespeare--to throw a great deal of extra time and effort into the task. They also illustrate an example of direct influence of the German-American theatre on the American Yiddish theatre, for in the process of hiring a German director, Thomashefsky imports a production style that he assiduously tries to reproduce for his Hamlet.

The extraordinary preparations did little to calm his nerves. Quite the contrary:

At the last rehearsal, I really felt that I was falling apart. The thought that tonight I would have to appear as Hamlet completely unglued me. In my mind appeared all the Hamlets I had seen on various stages.

Especially engraved on my memory was the Hamlet of Edwin Booth . . . The night before I appeared as Hamlet, I went to Booth's Theatre and saw his Hamlet. That was perhaps the fiftieth time I had seen him in the role. I recall how I once traveled from Baltimore to Washington to see him play Hamlet. I simply idolized Booth. . . .

And tonight I myself have to appear in Hamlet! The first time in the history of the Yiddish theatre that Shakespeare's tragedy will be performed in Yiddish, and I have the luck to be the first Yiddish actor to play the starring role.¹⁹

Although a star of the Yiddish theatre by this point, Thomashefsky senses that playing Hamlet will change his status. It connects him to a tradition older than the professional Yiddish theatre and broader than the streets that border the Jewish neighborhoods of New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. In short, it connects him to the greatest heights to which an actor can aspire, even if it does not alter the composition of his audience by a single viewer.

Where Thomashefsky showed awed reverence for Shakespeare, Moyshe Zeifert's respect for the poet was tempered by more practical concerns. In 1897, Zeifert described a dream from the night his Othello premiered. He has died and gone to his final judgment, and the prosecuting angel points out that Zeifert was a shund playwright who "twisted the truth, crushed aesthetics underfoot and corrupted the public taste." The Chairman of the court sentences Zeifert to twenty years in hell, after which he will go to Pittsburgh to work as a reform rabbi:

'Halt! He is innocent!' cried out my defending angel in the nick of time. 'He did not do it out of corruption, God forbid; the poor man was just terribly needy, with a large family: a wife and children. . . .

There are men of the theatre with us here in Paradise who have sinned far more than he, but nevertheless they now eat the nectar and drink the sacred wine. For example, take William Shakespeare! . . .'

'Shakespeare?' asked the 'Chairman' with astonishment. 'How has he sinned?'

'He wrote the play Shylock (The Merchant of Venice) and with it made a mockery and a disgrace of the best people on the face of the earth, the whole Jewish nation. In a word, he is simply a major anti-Semite.'

'Bring Shakespeare to me,' the 'Chairman' demanded. Shakespeare came in riding on two adders. 'Why did you insult the Jews with your Shylock?' the 'Chairman' asked him.

'Your honor,' Shakespeare answered proudly, 'I was a poet, and we poets dream with our eyes open.'

'That is a lame excuse, my dear sir,' the Chairman answered. 'You must be punished! . . . Go right now to the Windsor Theatre and see how the Yiddish actors mangle your Othello. . . .'

Shakespeare disappeared, and returned half an hour later. I hardly recognized him. He looked a hundred years older, a cloud of sorrow shading his fine, high forehead. 'I have sinned, I have lusted, I have rebelled,' he cried, and threw himself on one knee before the Chairman. 'Punish me as you see fit, but not with that! Leave me be! I'll burn my plays up, I'll sell them as wrapping paper!'

'Aha!' exclaimed the Chairman. 'Now you see the trouble it gets you when you trifle with the Chosen People? Go straight to Gehenna!' And so Shakespeare departed, sobbing and whimpering.

Now the Chairman turned to me: 'You, Moyshe Zeifert, go back to the world below, take on Shakespeare's Hamlet, but remember! You should butcher it so thoroughly that not a scrap of him remains. And tell all your dramatist friends to chop the classics into sauerkraut. Go!'

A shiver ran through my body. I turned over, came to, and looked around. And that was my dream.²⁰

Zeifert paints an afterlife in which aesthetics and morality interact to determine the fate of the artist's soul. Economic need must be weighed against the concern for artistic integrity, and Zeifert strongly suggests that in the Yiddish theatre, the latter was no match for the former.

Zeifert spins out a self-effacing fantasy here, but also

a fantasy of Jewish writers deconstructing (or perhaps a better coinage would be destructing) the works of a Gentile poet who they feel has done them wrong--not to explore the nuances of any possible anti-Semitism, but simply to get revenge. The artistic crudeness of the Yiddish theatre finds its place in the divine scheme of things as the ideal way of making anti-Semitic Gentile writers literally turn over in their graves by co-opting and corrupting their masterpieces.

At the same time, Zeifert's account of the aftermath of his dream shows his acknowledgment of Shakespeare's status as a great poet, and of the care that Shakespeare's plays require if they are to be adapted properly--indeed, more care than Zeifert and his colleagues can afford to give them:

A few days after my terrible dream, I was called to the Thalia Theatre and the company ordered me 'to make Hamlet!' All complaints and protests were to no avail. I protested against the impudence of the company, but my stomach protested against my impudence. 'Robber!' rang the voice of my stomach in my ears, 'you get fifty dollars for this . . . Don't you know that with fifty dollars you'd be as rich as Wanamaker?'

I undertook the 'work.' Woe unto me! What I didn't make from that Hamlet! Everything: an unsexed creature, an androgyne, everything in the world, but no Hamlet!! I exacted a high price from the play.

From the gorgeous building, I took out the foundation, the walls, and the roof. I left not a single pane intact in the beautiful palace. I did it partly out of patriotism--I wanted to take revenge on the 'anti-Semite' Shakespeare--and partly, indeed, for the fifty dollars . . . The company was very happy with Shakespeare (? ? ?) and I believe that up there in seventh heaven, the Chairman was also happy with my 'work,' but Shakespeare, poor thing, could only bang his head against the walls of Hell.²¹

Zeifert struggles, albeit playfully, with mixed allegiances here. As a Jew, he relishes the chance to retaliate against

an enemy. But as an artist--even one of modest talents--he has some pity for his doubly damned colleague/antagonist.

Whatever Zeifert's artistic sins, his Hamlet, according to both Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, was a box-office success at the Thalia, though only for a few weeks. The editors of Di arbeter tsaytung saw this success as a happy omen. The newspaper's editors saw the fact that Zeifert's Hamlet was selling out in advance after two weeks as a sign that the Yiddish public was not so unsophisticated after all,

and that it is not satisfied when the actor goes "pa" with his feet and sings "put--put--put." And we are sure that it will suffice for the public to demand that the theatre directors produce plays that are truly instructive and true to nature. . . . We only regret that the translation of such a serious play was not undertaken by someone in the position to understand the original well. "Doctor" Zeifert, as we know, cannot be suspected of doing so.²²

A reviewer for Di yidishe gazeten echoed some of these reactions to the play that he described as a tragedy about "a big shlimazl," or a chronically unlucky person.²³ But there is more to Hamlet; he is also "the person in whom is reflected the tragic in life." While also delighting in the fact that such a masterpiece has been performed for Yiddish audiences, the reviewer speculates that the translation may have been written "faster than the actors perform it."²⁴

The Yidishe gazeten reviewer provides examples of some of the translation's shortcomings. First of all, "all of the characters besides Hamlet have almost nothing to say, and just hover over the stage like shadows." Claudius, he says, should

come across as both a king and a murderer, but Zeifert has eliminated everything regal about him and reduces him to a common killer. Ophelia is appropriately "quiet and fine," but too much so for us to get to know her. The scene with the players drags, and the "To be or not to be" soliloquy is translated "so weakly, that [Thomashefsky] gets completely lost." Nevertheless, Thomashefsky performs the role of Hamlet with feeling and understanding, and Messrs. Conrad, Marks, and Bernstein "are as good as one can expect from them in such a play." The audience, however, gets higher marks: "Everyone in the audience listened attentively and followed the entire action with interest."²⁵

Both the Arbeter tsaytung editorial and the Yidishe gazeten review raise an issue that could not have been raised about Gordin: the dichotomy between the artistic merit of the play and the mediocrity of the translator. Gordin averted such criticism by reworking his Shakespearean source in Jewish terms. Yiddish Shakespearean activity in the mid-1890s followed Gordin's lead only halfway; it saw the potential advantages of adapting Shakespeare, but tended to stick to the action and characters of the original rather than finding ways to make those elements specifically Jewish.

The difference between Zeifert and Gordin as adaptors of Shakespeare goes a step further. Looking back on this period, Thomashefsky wondered, "without me, who knows how many years would have gone by until Shakespeare would have been performed

on the Yiddish stage?"²⁶ This question conveniently overlooks not only the fact that Adler's company staged Shakespeare first, but also the existence of another previous Yiddish Shakespearean adaptation: Gordin's Der yidisher kenig Lir. Yet Thomashefsky does not appear to see the need to distinguish Gordin's play from his own activity. If the attitude Thomashefsky expresses here was at all typical of the Yiddish theatre community, then Der yidisher kenig Lir was seen not as the Shakespearean adaptation that broke the cultural ice for future adaptations, but as a Gordin play that happened to be inspired by Shakespeare.

Such reasoning could account for the fact that other Yiddish playwrights did not immediately follow Gordin's precedent of Judaizing Shakespeare, for while anyone could adapt Shakespeare, there was only one Gordin. This has nothing to do with which playwright was the greater artist; it has to do with which playwright was still working. One could take great liberties with the dead, but to take on the most acclaimed living Yiddish playwright could prove fatal.

For all its shortcomings, Zeifert's Hamlet managed to run frequently for the rest of the season.²⁷ In the meantime, the Thalia mounted a Shakespearean spectacle of a different sort. A newspaper advertisement of 26 January 1894 shows what at first glance appears to be a stereoscopic illustration of Edwin Booth, the most famous American tragedian of his day, posing as Hamlet (Fig. 3). Closer inspection shows the two

images to differ in subtle details. While the two men are dressed and posed identically, the one on the right has his hair parted differently, a slightly broader nose than the purely aquiline one of his counterpart, and rounder eyes. The accompanying Yiddish text will at first play coyly with, and then explain, the near-twin illustrations.

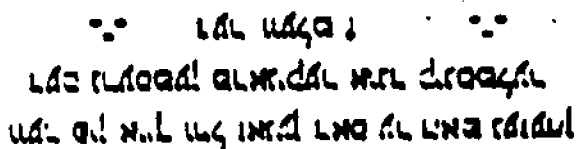
The text identifies the man on the right as Edwin Booth and his counterpart as William Booth. Yiddish text running vertically next to Edwin's picture reads, "Who among you wants to see a dead man come to life?" Next to William's portrait runs the question, "Who among you wants to say that he has seen the greatest tragedian and artist in the world?" The text continues horizontally below the pictures:

And who among you wants to say that he has seen such a thing! That one cannot believe one's own eyes? Then come en masse on Sunday evening, the 28th of January, to that temple of art, the Thalia Theatre, where you will see the greatest artist in the world, Herr Edwin Booth, after his death represented by William Booth, in the two classic art roles by Shakespeare, Hamlet and Richard the 3rd. Besides that, nearly all of the Thalia Theatre company will take part in this sacred concert, such as Herr Thomashefsky, Marks, Bernstein, Conrad, Madam Thomashefsky, Fraulein Sabina Weinblatt, and many other Yiddish and English singers and dancers engaged especially for this great festival this Sunday evening, the 28th of January, 1894.

Edwin Booth had died six months earlier, on 7 June 1893. Naturally, his death was front-page news, and a public tribute to him on 13 November 1893, where he was lauded by such colleagues as Joseph Jefferson III, Henry Irving, and Tommaso Salvini, was just one instance of posthumous attention to the Booth name.

46-48
1707
פֿילֿזאָפֿיע

SECRET



א מילקס און פארמיקטעס

אין חשך פון אײַך נאנט דאס ער האט געקוקט און האט :

דער זון וואנאסא 28סטן דאנאר, און קענען ספעציעל פון שטארק מחמאט וואו איר זינט דאס נאכטן קומענדיג וועט זיין דא וואס קלענערע קינדער וועלן פון ספעציעל.

ה' עדרון בופה וויליאם בופה
המקע אונד ריטשארד רעם בופה
פון דעם אדמיראל קאנדידאט פון דעם
פארשטאנד פון דעם פארשטאנד פון דעם

THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION WAS OBTAINED FROM THE BUREAU OF THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY, NEW YORK CITY, ON 10/10/68:

הישרדן סאבאפעזעס, מאריטע, בערעסען, פארייניגטע סטאטעס, און פאר אונזער הייזער
ענגליש נאכער און ספאניש סטראל אנגאליזש פאר דעם פוסט פון דרעסען וואסאגן אבערס, דען 28סטען "אוגוסט", 1941.

THESE DOCUMENTS ARE THE PROPERTY OF THE FBI AND ARE TO BE RETURNED TO THE FBI OFFICE OF ORIGIN UPON REQUEST.

Edwin Booth left behind a number of legacies: a subdued, intellectual approach to acting that ultimately supplanted the athletic, bombastic style of the previous generation, led by Edwin Forrest; The Players, the distinguished theatrical club Booth helped create in 1888, and to which he bequeathed the Gramercy Park building that remains its home; and a daughter Edwina by his wife Mary Devlin. But notably absent from Booth's literal or figurative offspring was anyone who went by the name of William.²⁸

The Yiddish theatres in New York were in the midst of a Shakespeare boom when the Thalia Theatre presented its Booth imitation, advertised as an occasion to deposit Booth's memory in one's cultural bank account so that one will not only have "seen" Edwin Booth, but also be able to "say that one has seen" him--that is, to own the experience of having done so. The scholarship on Edwin Booth does not mention a parallel phenomenon in English-speaking American theatres, perhaps because it could not have happened among audiences more familiar with Booth's acting, and thus less willing to tolerate a lesser imitation.

The promotion of "William Booth," spuriously suggesting a family connection to the great tragedian, recalls an episode in Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, when the hero meets the two colorful charlatans who present themselves as the "Duke of Bridgewater" and the dauphin of France, who would have been Louis XVII had a revolution not interrupted his career. One

of their various schemes to defraud the folks living along the Mississippi involves the duke's combined experiences at printing handbills and performing soliloquies, scenes, and swordfights from Shakespeare. The handbill announcing the duke's and dauphin's performance in a small town in Arkansas treats the townsfolk to a feast of outrageous claims that begins:

Shakesperean Revival! ! !
 Wonderful Attraction
 For One Night Only!
 The world renowned tragedians,
 David Garrick the younger, of Drury Lane Theatre, London,
 and
 Edmund Kean the elder, of the Royal Haymarket Theatre,
 Whitechapel, Pudding Lane, Piccadilly, London, and the
 Royal Continental Theatres, in their sublime
 Shaksperean Spectacle entitled
 The Balcony Scene
 in
 Romeo and Juliet! ! !²⁹

The Thalia's alleged William Booth probably had as intimate acquaintance with Edwin Booth as the duke and the dauphin had with David Garrick and Edmund Kean. The duke counted on the lack of sophistication of "these Arkansaw lunkheads"³⁰ for his scheme to work (it did, but only because he had the foresight to leave town immediately after collecting the ticket money for the third night's performance). The Thalia management seems to have counted on Yiddish-speaking "lunkheads" to pay to see William Booth.

That the Yiddish theatres were not above carrying out other Barnumesque ruses akin to the exploits of Twain's duke and dauphin is illustrated by a 1909 Zeifert sketch entitled,

"Anything for Work." Zeifert describes a sojourn in the South, where he had gone to join a friend in starting a new Yiddish newspaper. Upon his arrival, Zeifert explores the city and comes across an astonishing Yiddish theatre poster announcing

All the greatest Yiddish stars in America together. Friday evening for the first time in the Criterion Theatre, HAMLET, or the Prince of Denmark. The Jewish Kainz, Boris Thomashefsky, in the title role; the Jewish Salvini, the Great Eagle,³¹ Jacob Adler, as King Claudius; the Jewish Coquelin, David Kessler, as Polonius; Madam Sara Adler as Queen Gertrude and Madam Bessie Thomashefsky as Ophelia, with the participation of the best actors from New York.³²

Zeifert could not believe his eyes. Was this a dream? Had the Messiah come?

Neither, actually. When Zeifert went to see the show and saw one character after another bearing no resemblance whatsoever to the stars named on the poster, he stormed backstage to demand an explanation. The stage manager turned yellow upon learning that Zeifert was from New York, and begged him to hold his tongue out of pity for the poor troupe, who had wives and children to feed. As in the nightmare Zeifert had described a dozen years earlier, business takes precedence over artistic integrity. But Zeifert decides to return to New York, unwilling to provide a Yiddish newspaper for a town that turns nobodies into stars.

It may have been the combination of the continued run of Hamlet and the resurrection of the spirit of Edwin Booth that prompted the managers of the Windsor Theatre to turn once more

to Shakespeare. This time, they staged Reuben Weissman's adaptation of The Merchant of Venice, which opened on 8 February 1894. The script does not survive, and the production seems to have failed miserably, for no more advertisements appear for it, at least in New York. But the title itself tells us something. Weissman called his adaptation Shylock, the Merchant of Venice. Connoisseurs will note that Shakespeare's title refers to Antonio. But much as Shylock has grabbed center stage in the history of the play's production, he would be even more likely to capture the attention of Jewish viewers, though for different reasons. Nevertheless, Yiddish audiences in the 1890s did not yet take any great interest in the play.³³

Shakespeare's life, on the other hand, did gain some attention in 1894 when Di yidishe gazeten published a biographical sketch in two installments. The article starts and ends with paragraphs that dole out lavish praise:

Recent generations have recognized the poet William Shakespeare as the greatest dramatist the world has ever known. His plays are still performed in every living language, and we see it as our duty to familiarize our readers at least a little bit with the most important aspects of his life and work. . . . This is the description of a person whom Heaven endowed with a prophetic sense and who gave the world new thought, new wisdom and feelings. Today there is not a corner of the world where his name is not known, and not a major city where his statue cannot be found.³⁴

The tone echoes that of the same newspaper's 1893 series of plot summaries. Perhaps the reason that this paper takes this "duty" upon itself at this particular time is the spate of new

translations of Shakespeare into Yiddish. After reading this article, one could no longer naively call for the Bard to take a curtain call.

After several more appearances in Zeifert's Hamlet in 1894,³⁵ Thomashefsky did not appear in another New York performance of the play until 1897. In the interim, he staged adaptations of several other Shakespeare plays, starting with Romeo and Juliet on 14 September 1894.

The Thalia's advertisements for Romeo and Juliet resume the company's war of words against the Windsor. A lengthy ad in Der teglekher herald exclaims, "Victory! Triumph! Art! Poetry!" and goes on to make some bold claims while taunting the theatre's rivals and critics:

The Thalia Theatre has taken upon itself the difficult and holy task of familiarizing the Yiddish public with the divine work of Shakespeare, and will therefore produce Romeo and Juliet. Only the Thalia Theatre trusts the Yiddish theatregoer, and when we presented Hamlet, our competition made fun of us. How can 'Moyshe' go to Shakespeare? How can the little Jew understand such a divine, serious work? The astonishing effect of Hamlet showed that the Yiddish public loves, esteems, and understands great, instructive, serious works, and we are going on to present Romeo and Juliet as well. . . . Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet should be a temple of writing and a school for learning and understanding.³⁶

It was actually the Windsor Theatre, presumably the "competition" alluded to here, that beat the Thalia to the punch in producing Shakespeare. But the ad ignores the facts and implies that the Thalia deserves the patronage of Yiddish audiences who want to see Shakespeare because it is the theatre that respects their intelligence. The ad uses two

strategies simultaneously: the names of its stars, and an appeal to more abstract notions of art, instruction, and the intelligence of the audience. By mentioning the sense of duty to its audiences, the ad echoes the Yidishe gazeten biography of Shakespeare, which saw such a feature as a "duty" to its readers. The Thalia ad also extends previous praise of Shakespeare, now deeming him "divine."

A subsequent press release in the same newspaper reinforces the Thalia's insistence that it alone is the realm of Yiddish Shakespearean production:

Only this theatre can present a classic work . . . because where else can you find so classic a Hamlet and so poetic a Romeo as Thomashefsky? . . . The tremendous success of these two dramas is the best indication that only the unsurpassed classical actors from the Thalia Theatre have the right to popularize Shakespeare's work.³⁷

Earlier in their rivalry, Adler supposedly scoffed at the idea of Thomashefsky the shund specialist appearing in Shakespeare. Only a year later, the wheel has come full circle. The ad identifies Thomashefsky with two Shakespearean roles, and even goes so far as to claim a "right" to the exclusive possession of Yiddish productions of Shakespeare.

The Thalia's production of Romeo and Juliet, translated by Mikhl Goldberg,³⁸ cuts the play's Prologue and opening dialogue, which consists of bantering between two of the Capulets' servants. Instead, Goldberg begins his version with the swordfight between servants of the Montagues and Capulets. This is consistent with other Yiddish adaptations of

Shakespeare, which tend to show little interest in what servants and other ordinary citizens have to say.

Goldberg's translation generally follows the language and action of Shakespeare's text while making cuts to move the action along. Most of the cuts eliminate scenes involving secondary characters such as Juliet's parents and the servants of the two families. At a couple of notable points, however, Goldberg alters his source in other ways. For example, he changes Juliet's age from fourteen to seventeen. The Nurse mentions her age several times, so the change is no accident; besides, Goldberg has the Nurse calculate that Juliet was weaned fourteen rather than eleven years ago. Goldberg may have wanted to avoid the moral opprobrium of the audience, or he may simply have wanted to stay within the bounds of verisimilitude. After all, Sophia Karp was about thirty-five when the play premiered in 1894, so making Juliet a few years older would strain the audience's credulity that much less.

While many of Goldberg's cuts simply advance the action, some suggest another motive. Romeo, the quintessential lover, suffers the pangs of love at the beginning of Shakespeare's play, but for Rosaline, not Juliet. That Romeo can transfer his love so quickly and so thoroughly from Rosaline to Juliet suggests a capriciousness in his passion. The Yiddish text eliminates this interpretation by cutting all mention of Rosaline. It also takes any responsibility for Mercutio's

death out of Romeo's hands. Shakespeare has Tybalt stab Mercutio when Romeo clumsily tries to intervene in their swordfight, but the Yiddish version keeps Romeo at a remove from the duel and cuts Mercutio's later comment to Romeo: "Why the devil came you between us? I was hurt under your arm."³⁹ By making certain strategic cuts, Goldberg steers the audience away from any ambiguous reactions to Romeo.

In what will become a signature of Yiddish translations of Shakespeare's plays, Goldberg tends to exaggerate the characters' emotions in the closing moment of each act, leaving the audience with a grand gesture as the curtain falls. Shakespeare concludes Act I with the Capulets' ball, where Romeo and Juliet meet, dance, and fall in love (though not necessarily in that order). As Romeo leaves the party with the other guests, Juliet learns that he is a Montague and thus her family's enemy. Someone then calls for Juliet from offstage, and she exits with her Nurse. The Yiddish version has Romeo call Juliet from offstage, which elicits a more elaborate reaction from Juliet than Shakespeare calls for: "Juliet falls in a chair, Nurse with light."⁴⁰ Rather than having the Nurse lead Juliet off, the Yiddish version has her literally illuminate Juliet's feelings, thus making the girl's passion grand and unambiguous.

Actually, Shakespeare himself might have inspired Goldberg to make Juliet fall into the chair, for both of Shakespeare's lovers fall literally as well as figuratively

during the play. Romeo collapses eloquently when he learns of his banishment, as he tells Friar Laurence:

Wert thou as young as I, Juliet thy love,
An hour but married, Tybalt murdered,
Doting like me, and like me banished,
Then mightst thou speak, then mightst thou tear thy hair,
And fall upon the ground, as I do now,
Taking the measure of an unmade grave. [III.iii.65-70]

The Yiddish stage directions take the image further, as Romeo "throws himself to the ground." (11) Similarly, when Juliet drinks the potion that will make her comatose, she "throws herself onto the bed." (47) Where Shakespeare has Juliet exit at the end of Act I, Goldberg has her fall. Where Shakespeare's lovers fall, Goldberg's throw themselves down.

Goldberg uses tableaux to end other scenes as well. He provides an almost word-for-word translation of most of the balcony scene, but again heightens the emotions at the end. As Juliet exits, she drops her handkerchief, which Romeo kisses. Left alone, he kneels and exclaims, "My Juliet! My Juliet!" (18) Act II ends with a clandestine wedding in Friar Laurence's chamber, and another stage picture: The Friar whispers in Romeo's and Juliet's ears, kneels with the Bible, raises his eyes to Heaven and lifts his hands in the air. All of these tableaux reveal a characteristic of the Yiddish acting style, a trait that seems to have transcended national borders and persisted over the course of much of the Yiddish theatre's history. As Jacob Mestel observed, the Yiddish actor tended to rely much more on gesture than on tone and diction: "The less emphasis he lay on the spoken word, the

richer his gesture and mimicry had to be."⁴¹

While Goldberg makes small changes throughout the play, he radically rewrites the ending by eliminating everyone but the two lovers from the final scene, thus cutting Romeo's killing of Paris, the Friar's explanation of the tragedy, and the "glooming peace" reached by the two families. Explanations and implications are left outside the action, which keeps the lovers' tragedy in the foreground.

Shakespeare's Romeo dies without realizing that Juliet lives, but the Yiddish Apothecary's poison works slowly enough for the lovers to say good-bye. Just after he drinks the poison, Juliet awakens, understandably disoriented. She eventually realizes that the voice she hears near her in the tomb belongs to Romeo. And Goldberg creates a pastiche of Shakespeare's words and new dialogue to end the play:

JULIET: I recognize that voice, its sweetness awakens my sleepy soul. . . . O my dear, my beloved, let me touch your hand and kiss your sweet lips. You frighten me. Speak, let me hear another voice beside my own in this house of death.

ROMEO: I cannot, I have no strength. O deadly poison.

JULIET: Poison? What does your trembling voice mean? These pale lips and your staring eyes?

ROMEO: I am fighting with death now. O true apothecary! Thy drugs are quick. O, O. (Winces with pain) O Juliet! Juliet! (Dies)

JULIET: O churl! drunk all, and left no friendly drop To help me after? I will kiss thy lips.

Haply some poison yet doth hang on them. (Kisses him) Thy lips are warm! (Noises)

What do I hear? They come.

Then I'll be brief. O happy dagger!

This is thy sheath; there rust and let me die. (Stabs herself. Curtain.) (52-53)

What Goldberg loses by cutting the last 140 lines of

Shakespeare's text is the notion that the deaths of Romeo, Juliet, and their peers can be made meaningful by teaching the Montagues and Capulets to bury their enmity--an important idea which Goldberg sacrifices for the sake of a different sort of theatrical sensibility, for while Shakespeare's resolution of the action can be seen as the necessary restoration of order, it can also be seen as anticlimactic. If this play is all about Romeo and Juliet, who cares what happens to the other characters after the lovers die? Goldberg leaves the audience with the emotional knockout punch, not the smelling salts to bring them to their senses.

The ink on Goldberg's translation of Romeo and Juliet may still have been drying when Thomashefsky commissioned his next Shakespearean vehicle: Richard III, which premiered at the Thalia on 1 November 1894. A newspaper advertisement announced

The greatest masterpiece Richard the Third by the greatest master William Shakespeare. Attention! On the greatest Yiddish stage 'Thalia Theatre' by the greatest Yiddish actor Boris Thomashefsky. Hear what the world's critics say. . . .

'Richard the Third' is a play beloved by audiences around the world, and the greatest actors--Barnay, Possart, Sonnenthal, Booth, and all the other great actors in the world--have shown their artistry in this masterpiece. . . .

Schlegel the dramaturg says in his criticism on Shakespeare:

Although Shakespeare inserted a world of history into 'Richard the Third,' it is so clearly written that every person, even those who are not experts . . . must easily understand the play. Every little role presents a familiar type, a true human character, and the role of Richard is written so true to nature that every observer forgets himself and thinks that he sees one of his own acquaintances before him, and that is why 'Richard the

Third' is the most popular play of all of Shakespeare's works. Small and large, educated and uneducated, all nations, Germans, Russians, Frenchmen, Englishmen, kings and servants, capitalists and workers--all, all take off their hats to 'Richard the Third'--all run to see him on the stage--all wonder at him all love him and all honor him.

Should the Yiddish stage fall below other stages?
No! ! !

Our Yiddish Shakespeare tragedian Mr. B. Thomashefsky, who has not rested until he has seen the Yiddish stage equal the other stages of the world . . . has now taken another step in his ascent towards the highest level of art, up to 'Richard the Third.' He hopes not to rest until he reaches his goal of making the Yiddish public equal to all the other nations of the world and the Yiddish stage into a world stage.⁴²

The advertisement sets out to establish the play's importance by asserting its popularity among both audiences and actors. But mere greatness does not suffice; the ad reassures theatregoers of all sorts that the play has something to offer each of them. For the sophisticated, there is the prospect of seeing a "masterpiece," a re-enactment of history, a poetic work of art. Those who might be scared away by those very qualities can turn out to see a "popular" work whose complexity comes sugar-coated with exciting encounters. The Thalia hedges its bets by aspiring to equality with the great theatres of the world, but assuring its stalwarts that such ambitions need not diminish their fun.

The ad also betrays an ambivalence about the status of the Yiddish theatre. Underneath the assertions of the production's greatness lies the acknowledgment that the Yiddish theatre does not yet operate at the artistic level of the theatre of other cultures. But the ad cleverly turns this

into a selling point: this production marks the highest artistic level that the Yiddish theatre has reached so far, and audiences can help it move even further by filling the house for such productions.

The flamboyant Thomashefsky would undoubtedly have relished the opportunity to play a character who spends so much time on stage and who expresses his emotions so exuberantly, but Richard III spent only three evenings on the Thalia's stage. The absence of reviews makes it hard to account for specific reasons for the play's failure, but despite the production's potential attractions, Richard III seems in retrospect an odd choice to present to audiences who were known for wanting virtuous heroes. As Moyshe Zeifert wrote, "If the actor plays a good person, [the audience] loves him and applauds him, even if he plays very poorly. But if he plays an evil person, the audience will hate him fiercely and won't give him a single 'bravo,' though he act like Possart."⁴³

Thomashefsky continued to stage new translations of Shakespeare's tragedies in 1895, but with little success. The ephemerality of his production of Julius Caesar was not for lack of fanfare; one ad asked readers:

Are you familiar with the news from the Thalia Theatre?
 . . . Right here in the Thalia Theatre, the greatest
 heroes! United! One great union! Sigmund Feinman,
 Boris Thomashefsky! Together for the first time! She is
 also here! She too! The greatest! One and only! The
 famous and widely praised actress Madam Dina Feinman. .
 . . Together they now have the honor to present to the
 public . . . for the first time on the Yiddish stage,

Julius Caesar, tragedy in 5 acts by Shakespeare, adapted by [D.] M. Hermalin.⁴⁴

The advertisement goes on to list the leading players and their roles: Feinman as Brutus, Thomashefsky as Cassius, Tabatshnikov as Marc Antony, Mary Epstein as Portia. It does not name Dina Feinman's role, but she probably played Caesar's wife, Calphurnia, the only remaining female speaking role in the play.

Julius Caesar ran for only four evenings, in February 1895, at the Thalia. The Yiddish press provides little information about the production, but the play inspired a heavily tongue-in-cheek commentary masquerading as a theatre review. Most of the piece, published in the magazine The Yiddish Puck, is addressed directly to Shakespeare. The critic's pretended quarrels with the playwright reveal a little bit about the production; they say more about the critic's perception of both the state of the American Yiddish theatre and of the potential problems of performing Shakespeare's plays in Yiddish.

The critic begins his list of complaints by noting some cultural gaps between Shakespeare and the Yiddish theatre: "Since we all know that you were born a goy, how did you come to creep onto the Yiddish stage? Do you know the taste of the Yiddish public, the abilities of the actors, etc?" Similarly, since Shakespeare is "certainly no New Yorker," he has no way of knowing how many actors are in the Thalia company, and how to tailor the roles to their specific talents.⁴⁵ Taken at

face value, this polemic demands that only a Jewish New Yorker can write for the New York Yiddish theatre. By extension, each American city in which Yiddish theatre was performed would need to produce its own playwrights as well.

But the hyperbolic tone of much of the review shows that the critic does not really insist upon such narrow cultural specificity. "How did you forget," he demands of Shakespeare, "to give the costumer a chance [to make] 120 Turkish hats, 200 Spanish boots, 150 Portuguese trousers, 270 uhlands' shirts, and a few thousand African spears?" Similarly, the critic argues, Shakespeare denied the director the chance to "make a few dozen heavens and hells" and other exotic settings, and to fill the stage with sheep, donkeys, horses, and oxen; "without them, the Yiddish stage certainly cannot exist."⁴⁶

The critic has seized the opportunity provided by the staging of a non-Yiddish play to point out some of the Yiddish theatre's excesses, such as exotic but mismatched costumes, scenic effects with no intrinsic function in the play, and rigid lines of business. By pretending to criticize the play, he indirectly condemns the performers: "No wonder our beloved actors and actresses played badly; try playing a lifeless work in which there is just speaking and acting . . ."⁴⁷ Although Shakespeare has yet to prove himself up to the task, the critic expresses his confidence that a few more productions will allow the actors to "show Mr. Shakespeare the ways of the Yiddish theatre . . . and the Yiddish stage will recapture her

laurels."⁴⁸

After its short run, Julius Caesar seems to have dropped out of the production repertoire of the Yiddish theatre, though artful translations made more for reading than for performance were published in 1918 and 1933.⁴⁹ These later translations are thus akin to the first known translation of a Shakespeare play into Yiddish: Betsalel Vishnipski's 1886 translation of Julius Caesar.⁵⁰ Yet in spite of this translation history, Julius Caesar never found its niche on Yiddish stages.

Thomashefsky's production of Macbeth arrived with less fanfare, and met with even less success, than Julius Caesar. It played at the Thalia Theatre only on 3 and 4 May 1895, again in a Hermalin translation that is no longer extant. Hermalin would contribute further to Shakespeare's representation in Yiddish by translating Coriolanus for Sigmund and Dinah Feinman in 1901, and by assembling plot synopses for a 1908 collection, Selected Works of Shakespeare. In his Preface to the book, Hermalin states its goal:

To give the Yiddish reader a conception of Shakespeare. We say a conception and not a study, because in order to study Shakespeare . . . we must turn to the original, or at least to the famous German translation, which is almost as good as the original. It is highly doubtful whether there will ever be a comparable Yiddish translation of Shakespeare, but meanwhile, we think that the following work will be a great service to our poor Yiddish literature.⁵¹

Shakespeare is good for you, goes the logic of the Preface, and Hermalin later adds that the plays are easier to digest in

story form. Hermalin's claim about the suitability of the German translation shows both how little attention adaptors such as Hermalin paid to textual complications, and the high regard in which the Ludwig Tieck/August Schlegel translation was held. Not only is there no question of folios and quartos, but even a skillful translation of Shakespeare serves to give the reader a deep understanding of his work.

What Hermalin omits from his Preface reveals almost as much as what he includes. He explains that he has based his work on Charles and Mary Lamb's Tales From Shakespeare, which he says they wrote in order to "popularize Shakespeare for the people."⁵² The Lambs were more specific about precisely which people they had in mind:

The following Tales are meant to be submitted to the young reader as an introduction to the study of Shakespeare . . . I have wished to make these Tales easy reading for very young children. . . . For young ladies too it has been my intention chiefly to write, because boys are generally permitted the use of their fathers' libraries at a much earlier age than girls are, they frequently having the best scenes of Shakespeare by heart, before their sisters are permitted to look into this manly book; and, therefore, instead of recommending these Tales to the perusal of young gentlemen who can read them so much better in the originals, I must rather beg their kind assistance in explaining to their sisters such parts as are hardest for them to understand . . .⁵³

If Hermalin had included the Lambs' true purpose in his Preface, he might have reminded his readers of such popular Yiddish works as the Tsena-Urena (ca. 1590), which took its title from a verse in the Song of Solomon that begins, "Go forth and see, O ye daughters of Zion." As Sol Liptzin

explains, "These words clearly indicated that the author had in mind primarily women as his readers. . . . On Saturday afternoons, mothers would read pages from it to their children . . ."⁵⁴ Had Hermalin been willing to confine his readership to women and children, he might have stayed with the Lambs' rationale. Even so, given the provenance of the idea for his book, Hermalin has written a sort of secular Tsena-Urena: a distillation of something that is both holy and requires specialized training and study to understand fully.

Hermalin also makes little mention of the production of Shakespeare's plays--a curious omission by someone who has translated them for the stage. But a passing remark Hermalin makes in his "Biography of William Shakespeare" at the beginning of the book reveals his sensibility about production: "Many of his plays were published during his life, but the audience did not realize their high literary value. He was successful only on the stage."⁵⁵ When even a playwright talks of Shakespeare's "mere" stage success, it reveals an outlook in which stageworthiness has nothing to do with literary worth, and the latter clearly ranks higher in the aesthetic hierarchy.

Hermalin never translated another Shakespeare play for Thomashefsky, and the combined failures of Julius Caesar and Macbeth may have cooled Thomashefsky's ardor for commissioning new translations of Shakespeare. From November 1893 to May 1895, Thomashefsky had appeared in six new translations of

Shakespeare's plays: Hamlet, The Merchant of Venice, Romeo and Juliet, Richard III, Julius Caesar, and Macbeth, in that order. Yet while Hamlet and Romeo and Juliet remained in the repertory for years, none of the others lasted for more than two weeks. For awhile, Thomashefsky seems to have cherished the idea that translations of Shakespeare could translate into box-office success. But when the flops continued to outnumber the hits, he seems to have backed off from the trend. He would keep performing in his Shakespearean warhorses, but he would shy away from the desire to exchange his theatrical kingdom for them.

While the production pattern provides a strong suggestion as to why Boris Thomashefsky went on a hiatus from new Shakespeare translations in the second half of the 1890s, the evidence does not indicate so clearly why he turned back to commissioning Shakespeare translations in the first decade of the twentieth century. The most likely impetus seems to have been Thomashefsky's enormous success in Isidore Zolotarevsky's The Yeshiva Boy, subtitled "The Yiddish Hamlet," in 1899.⁵⁶ Zolotarevsky's play was a return to the Judaized Shakespeare in the Gordin mode and quickly became a staple in the repertory. Perhaps the combination of its success and its billing as a Yiddish Hamlet led Thomashefsky back to attempting "straight" translations of Shakespeare in the hope that his audience's taste for Shakespeare had been whetted anew.

Thomashefsky returned to such translations with Mikhl Goldberg's rendering of King Lear at the People's Theatre on 23 October 1903. By that time, King Lear was a staple in the theatrical diet of Yiddish audiences, but its flavoring was distinctly Jewish. Audiences knew Dovid Moyshesles as the "Jewish King Lear" and Mirele Efros as the "Jewish Queen Lear" without having directly encountered their non-Jewish prototype on the Yiddish stage before.

A newspaper ad for King Lear announced

a holiday for art, a holiday for drama, a holiday for all art-loving people. Magnificent equipment, brilliant stage effects for this play have been worked on for weeks. . . . On the beautiful, noble People's Theatre will appear for the first time a work by the greatest poet of all times and all nations: Shakespeare's King Lear, translated by M. Goldberg. Directed by Mr. Boris Thomashefsky. Mr. Thomashefsky as King Lear. Mrs. Lobel as Cordelia, Mrs. Gudinski as Goneril, Mr. Rosenthal as Edgar and Mr. Tornberg as the Fool, Mr. Young as Gloucester, Mr. Kessler as Bastard, Mr. Conrad as Kent.-- Mr. Thomashefsky will exert all his energy, effort and know-how to make this play a success."⁵⁷

The ad extols Shakespeare in a manner that has by this point become commonplace in the Yiddish theatre culture, but it by no means depends solely on Shakespeare's prestige to bring audiences into the theatre. Like the press release for Thomashefsky's Richard III, it simultaneously embraces lovers of "high" art and lovers of "stage effects," fans of the "greatest poet of all times" and of one of the greatest Yiddish stars of his time.

Goldberg's King Lear puts Thomashefsky even more prominently at the center of the action than he would be in

the original by paring down the roles of the supporting characters. The roles of Goneril, Regan, and even Edmund are so drastically cut as to make them mere ciphers, and Albany and Cornwall become all but invisible. Furthermore, Goldberg takes every opportunity to give Lear the last word; Lear has the exit speech in Acts I, II, and IV of the Yiddish version. Shakespeare did not give Lear the last line of any act of the play except in the Quarto versions,⁵⁸ where Lear delivers the final words of Act IV: "Pray you now, forget and forgive: I am old and foolish." [IV.vii.84]

The most curious cut in Goldberg's adaptation is the near elimination of the role of Edmund. He does retain his soliloquy questioning the notion of illegitimacy, though without the wordplay of the original: "Why bastard? Wherefore base? . . . Why brand they us / With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?" [I.ii.6-10] The punning with "base" and "bastard" does not work in Yiddish, so Goldberg simply conveys the idea behind it: "Varum zol men unz titulirn mit den nidrigen vort bastard?"⁵⁹ [Why do they brand us with the lowly word bastard?] In Shakespeare, however, this soliloquy sets up Edmund's intrigue against his legitimate half-brother Edgar. In the Yiddish, Edmund shows us a letter that he says will undo Edgar, but the scenes that follow up on his scheme have been cut. The Yiddish version ultimately gives Edmund the same comeuppance as the English, but the cuts make it a scarcely motivated punishment.

What makes the abridgment of Edmund's role most curious also helps explain a possible reason for it. Edmund was played by David Kessler, who rivaled Jacob Adler and Boris Thomashefsky in his popularity as a leading man. The tall, swarthy, and stocky Kessler made his strongest mark as a Gordin actor, creating such roles as Apolon Zonenshayn in Sapho (1900) and Hershele Dubrovner in God, Man, and Devil (1900), Gordin's reworking of Faust. Why deprive such a star of a chance to shine in such a richly villainous role? Because he might shine too brightly and thereby eclipse some of Thomashefsky's sun.

Yet despite Goldberg's introducing the Edmund subplot only to obscure it, his translation shows a great deal of thought. Perhaps the scene that illustrates this point most clearly is the storm scene on the heath in Act III, for which Goldberg's text provides detailed stage directions marking each use of thunder, lightning, wind, and rain. A conflation of Shakespeare's text from the beginning of the scene--with the cuts Goldberg has made--and Goldberg's stage directions, should give a sense of the care that the translator has taken to match the special effects to the speeches:

LEAR: Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
 (strong lightning rain wind)
 You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
 Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!
 (lightning)
 You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,
 Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
 Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
 Strike flat the thick rotundity o'th'world!
 Crack Nature's moulds, all germins spill at once

That makes ingrateful man! (strong rain)
 FOOL: Good nuncle, in, ask thy daughters blessing
 (lightning and thunder very strong); here's a night
 pities neither wise men nor fools.
 LEAR: Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!
 Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters.
 I tax you not, you elements . . .
 I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children,
 You owe me no subscription. Then let fall
 Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand your slave,
 A poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old man; (much
 lightning)
 But yet I call you servile ministers,
 That will with two pernicious daughters join
 Your high-engender'd battles 'gainst a head
 So old and white as this. (thunder) O, ho! 'tis foul.
 (III.ii.1-24; Goldberg 43-44)

Goldberg has clearly taken care to match each occurrence of special effects to both the meaning of the dialogue and the emotional intensity of the scene.

After the scene on the heath, the action of Goldberg's translation moves quickly toward the end. It cuts most of the rest of Act III and almost all of Act IV except for Lear's reunions with Gloucester and Cordelia. Unlike in Shakespeare, the bodies of Goneril and Regan are not brought in at the end, perhaps for reasons of decorum. The rest of the action gets resolved essentially according to Shakespeare's texts. Goldberg also cuts the last few speeches from Shakespeare, so that the translation ends with Edgar saying of Lear, "Oh, virklekh tot," an equivalent of "He is gone, indeed." This feels abrupt compared to the elegant couplets with which Shakespeare leaves us:

The weight of this sad time we must obey,
 Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say:
 The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
 Shall never see so much, nor live so long. [V.iii.324-28]

Like most of Thomashefsky's Shakespearean endeavors of the 1890s, this version of King Lear did not last long on the stage: just one performance after its premiere weekend. Thomashefsky may have been drawn to the role by the great prestige it represented, especially by its tradition on the German stage. But Thomashefsky seems to have been much less suited to the role than his rivals Adler and Kessler, both of whom were far more renowned for exploring humanity's darker side in their roles than was Thomashefsky.

Nevertheless, Thomashefsky later went on to portray another of Shakespeare's exiled leaders: Coriolanus, also in a Goldberg translation. That Thomashefsky appeared in this play at all is curious for several reasons, starting with the commercial failure of most of his other Shakespearean productions. Furthermore, Coriolanus had already been staged in Yiddish by the Feinmans, in Hermalin's 1901 translation, no longer extant. If the Feinmans had scored a great box-office success with the play, it would be understandable for Thomashefsky to try to emulate it, but the quick exit of the earlier Coriolanus from the Yiddish stage did not bode well for a revival. Perhaps Thomashefsky was counting on Mikhl Goldberg's slightly better track record than Hermalin's; whereas none of the latter's Shakespeare translations lasted in production, at least Goldberg had the success of Romeo and Juliet to his credit.

Where Shakespeare's protagonist is a career soldier who

excoriates his men when they show less bravery than he, Goldberg paints a slightly more gentle picture of the Roman warrior. The most telling sign of this comes in Act III, where Coriolanus, whom the Roman senate wishes to name as a consul for his brave military service, bluntly expresses his contempt for the common people and the cowardly tribunes. Shakespeare gives Coriolanus a series of three speeches, each harsher than the one before, scoffing at those who have agreed to dole out free corn to the Roman people. Coriolanus insists that they have not earned the corn, since they recently abandoned him in his successful defense of the city against the Volscians:

They know the corn
Was not our recompense, resting well assur'd
They ne'er did service for't; being pressed to th'war,
Even when the navel of the state was touch'd,
They would not thread the gates. This kind of service
Did not deserve corn gratis. [III.i.120-25]

The cumulative effect of the speeches is to give Coriolanus' enemies the verbal ammunition to turn the people against him and have him banished from Rome. But the Yiddish version cuts all three passages, thus taking over sixty lines out of the mouth of the central character while keeping most of the rest of the scene intact. Such cuts contradict the usual logic of amplifying the leading role, but other criteria sometimes dictate what to cut and what to keep. Without these speeches, Coriolanus comes across as less extreme, and the Romans have less reason to banish him.

Goldberg's Coriolanus presents another anomaly: a short

scene that does not appear in Shakespeare. In Act IV, Coriolanus leaves Rome and heads for Antium, home of his rival, Tullus Aufidius. Aufidius appears three times in Act I of Shakespeare's text: preparing for war against Rome, in battle, and facing defeat. Goldberg cuts Aufidius out of Act I altogether; without this introduction to the character, his entrance in Act IV would be extremely abrupt.

In order to give Aufidius a more polished entrance, Goldberg begins Act IV with two pages of dialogue in which Aufidius complains to his Lieutenant about the weakness of his forces, and says that the specter of Coriolanus haunts him every day. His one goal, he says, is to recapture his honor in Rome. Until then, time passes slowly for him while his wounded pride makes him ill. Shakespeare places some of these ideas later in the scene; Goldberg moves them and elaborates on them to provide an introduction to Aufidius. As if in response to Aufidius' speeches, Coriolanus enters a moment later, and the two warriors join in an assault on Rome.

For a play containing so many battles, the last scene of Goldberg's translation consists to a remarkable degree of talk rather than action. In the last few pages of the text, Goldberg cuts the lines of all the characters except for Aufidius and Coriolanus, who debate such notions as duty and honor amid the mute crowd. After Aufidius and his men slaughter Coriolanus, Aufidius delivers a eulogy over the body of his victim. As in King Lear, the play ends with a death

march.

Many years after he first appeared as Hamlet, Thomashefsky returned to the role in yet another Goldberg translation. Goldberg's Hamlet, while drastically cut in many places, flows much more smoothly than does his King Lear--not surprising, since Lear contains a number of intrigues that do not include its central character, while the action in Hamlet never moves far from the play's protagonist.

Goldberg's Hamlet opens in the castle rather than on the ramparts, and places the ghost scenes together, thus cutting down on the number of scene changes required. Instead of cutting whole scenes, Goldberg tends to cut long speeches so that the action moves along quickly. Because of this technique, Goldberg reduces the role of Polonius from a "foolish prating knave" to little more than a fencing dummy. This economy carries over to consolidating certain roles. Tom Stoppard might be sorry to learn that Guildenstern is worse than dead in this version; he never appears at all. Rosencrantz does, though, and takes over his absent schoolmate's lines.

While many of Goldberg's cuts simply advance the action, he also consistently cuts material with any sexual overtones, thus preventing Hamlet from speaking of "country matters" with either Ophelia or Gertrude. He does confront his mother in her chamber, but without mentioning anything as explicit as the "rank sweat of an enseamed bed." [III.iv.92] The Yiddish

theatre tended to be conservative about such matters. Sexually explicit language and double entendres, even from the pen of a great Gentile poet, tended to be taboo.

Goldberg's typescript provides occasional stage directions designed to bring the emotion of certain scenes to the surface. Nowhere does this occur more strongly than when Hamlet first sees his father's ghost, at which point Hamlet falls into Horatio's arms and loses his hat. Thunder and lightning underscore the Ghost's commands to "Swear!" Where Shakespeare has the three friends exit together at the end of the scene, Goldberg sends Horatio and Marcellus off before Hamlet, who then has a short soliloquy: "Peace unto your body in your cold grave, unhappy son of the earth; peace to your restless spirit. In Heaven hear me: your avenger lives and will fight for you, fight until his last breath." (18-19) As he finishes this speech, Hamlet raises his sword to Heaven. Hamlet's enthusiastic tone here is just the opposite of that of the speech that Goldberg has cut, which concludes, "The time is out of joint--O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!-- / Nay, come, let's go together." [I.v.188-90] Typical of Yiddish adaptors, Goldberg replaces an emotionally ambivalent ending to the act with a stirring one; he directs the audience's moral compass, rather than leaving them to figure out where things stand.

For someone who finds it so difficult to bring himself to kill his father's murderer, Hamlet appears remarkably

dispassionate after he accidentally kills Polonius. Again, Goldberg alters Hamlet's reaction and brings the character's emotions to the surface. Shakespeare ends Act III by having Hamlet "lug [Polonius'] guts into the neighbor room." [III.iv.212] In the Yiddish version, Hamlet "draws his dagger, runs to his mother, she cries out. He throws away his sword, falls to her feet." And he cries, "O mother! Mother!" The Yiddish Hamlet's behavior after killing Polonius may be no less strange than in the original, but at least it is not detached--an attitude that does not seem to have been in Thomashefsky's theatrical vocabulary.

The final moments of the play, in typical Goldberg fashion, focus upon the death of the hero rather than with a closing speech that promises the restoration of order. Just as he cut the Prince's speech at the end of Romeo and Juliet, Goldberg cuts Fortinbras' final speech in Hamlet; indeed, he has cut the Fortinbras subplot out of the play altogether. The play closes with Hamlet's dying words:

Horatio, I am dying. The black veil of death is spreading over my eyes. The poison is working. Everything is swimming in a sea of fire. The flames are rustling. Adieu, friend. I am going where eternal silence reigns. Now you are freed of your oath. Tell everything you have seen this terrible night. (Dies. All kneel. Bells are heard ringing. Curtain.) (70)

This ending exploits the sentimentality of the scene and emphasizes the personal rather than the political. Shakespeare's ending broadens the perspective to the larger significance of the corruption in the Danish court.

Goldberg's ending, on the other hand, stays with the death of the hero, for whom the audience has time to cry as the death knells ring.

While Boris Thomashefsky was probably responsible for bringing more of Shakespeare's plays to Yiddish audiences than anyone else, he never became known as a Yiddish Shakespearean actor. His fame as an actor of melodramas and operettas may have led him to make such a concerted effort to perform in Shakespeare's plays. He certainly was not drawn to new versions of Shakespeare by popular acclaim; ultimately, Hamlet and Romeo and Juliet, his first and third Shakespearean endeavors, remained the only Shakespearean plays he consistently revived. Perhaps the greatest contribution Thomashefsky's productions of Shakespeare made to the American Yiddish theatre culture was to make Shakespeare a recognized entity, a symbol of great artistic achievement. This idea was reinforced by Yiddish publications from the mid-1890s on, which would have further alerted Yiddish audiences to the prestige the name of Shakespeare carried.

Prestige alone, though, clearly did not suffice to bring audiences to the theatre. Indeed, perhaps this very praise intimidated audiences and carried the maxim of Shakespeare as box-office poison into the Yiddish theatre. Jacob Gordin had shown that Shakespearean themes, if handled properly, could resonate with Yiddish audiences. Thomashefsky's dual Yiddish Shakespearean career--in translations and in Judaized

adaptations--would confirm that Shakespeare's plays made their greatest impact on Yiddish audiences when adapted to specifically Jewish concerns.

NOTES

1. Boris Thomashefsky, Mayn lebns-geshikhte (New York: Trio Press, 1937), 295-96.
2. Bessie Thomashefsky, Mayn lebns-geshikhte (New York: Varhayt Publising Company, 1916), 222-23.
3. Celia Adler, Tsili Adler dertseylt (New York: Celia Adler Foundation and Book Committee, 1959), 1:319.
4. Ronald Sanders, The Downtown Jews (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 286-87. One of the two men was Sigmund Mogulesco, who would later become one of the most beloved comedians on the Yiddish stage.
5. Boris Thomashefsky, 42.
6. Ibid., 53-66.
7. Boris Thomashefsky, 67-80. Nahma Sandrow retells this version in Vagabond Stars, 72-76.
8. B. Weinstein, "Di ershte yorn fun yidishn teater in odes un in nyu york," Arkhiy far geshikhte fun yidishn teater un drame, ed. J. Shatsky (Vilna, 1930), 243-57.
9. Der litvisher filosof, "Shekspir oysgepreglt," Di yidishe gazeten, 13 October 1893.
10. After summarizing Hamlet, "Der litvisher filosof" tackles Othello (which he subtitles, "The revenge of the black general") on October 20, Romeo and Juliet (subtitled, "Love's holy altar in the cemetery") on October 27, and The Taming of the Shrew on November 3 and 17. The series resumes on November 24 with a new author, Benjamin Segelman, and a new title, "Shekspir bekitser" [Shakespeare in brief]. Segelman's more detailed synopses usually run for three weeks per play, and appear in the following order: The Comedy of Errors, King Lear, Much Ado About Nothing, Timon of Athens, As You Like It, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Measure for Measure, and Twelfth Night. The series runs until 15 June 1894.
11. I have been unable to locate Zeifert's translation of Othello, and although the catalogue of the Thomashefsky Collection in the New York Public Library's Jewish Division lists Zeifert's Hamlet among its holdings, the librarians there have been unable to find it.
12. Boris Thomashefsky, "Hinter di kulisn," Di teater velt 1 (Nov. 1908), 18.

13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Thomashefsky, Mayn lebns-geshikhte, 297-98.
16. Thomashefsky, "Hinter di kulishn," 18.
17. Thomashefsky, Mayn lebns-geshikhte, 299-300.
18. Ibid., 298-99.
19. Ibid., 300-301.
20. Moyshe Zeifert, "Di geshikhte fun idishn teater," in Di idishe bine, ed. Chanan Jacob Minikes (New York, 1897), 45.
21. Zeifert, 46-48.
22. Di arbeter tsaytung, 8 December 1893.
23. Leo Rosten elaborates on that definition in The Joys of Yiddish (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), 352: "Let me illustrate by combining four folk sayings: 'When a shlimazl winds a clock, it stops; when he kills a chicken, it walks; when he sells umbrellas, the sun comes out; when he manufactures shrouds, people stop dying.'"
24. Pasekh shin: sha, "Teater kritik: Hamlet prints fun denemark." Di yidishe gazeten, 15 December 1893. Zalmen Zylbercweig says that Zeifert's Hamlet was a "free adaptation," undoubtedly from a German translation; if so, Zeifert probably adapted Othello in a similar manner. See Zalmen Zylbercweig, "Shekspir af der yidisher bine un literatur," Hunder yor yidish teater (London: Jewish Cultural Society, 1962), 27.
25. Ibid.
26. Thomashefsky, "Hinter di kulishn," 17.
27. Thomashefsky chose it as the play for a benefit performance for himself at the Thalia on 21 December 1893. It was staged four more times in January 1894, but then started to lose its luster, for it did not reappear until March 31.
28. None of the books on Edwin Booth makes any mention of a William Booth; nor do Edwin Booth's obituaries, which do mention surviving immediate family members. The books include Stanley Kimmel, The Mad Booths of Maryland (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1940); L. Terry Oggel, Edwin Booth: A Bio-Bibliography (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992); and Eleanor Ruggles, Prince of Players (New York: Norton, 1953). Furthermore, Raymond Wemmlinger, librarian of the

Hampden-Booth Library at The Players, has never come across a similar phenomenon in the English-speaking American theatre (Raymond Wemmlinger: telephone communication with the author, 30 November 1993). Various obituaries can be found in the clippings file on Edwin Booth at the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center. That same collection makes note of the obituary of one William E. Booth in the New York Dramatic Mirror of 17 September 1904, which reads in its entirety: "William E. Booth, an actor who was this season a member of an Uncle Tom's Cabin company playing in the Middle West, died in St. Francis Hospital, Columbus, O., on Sept. 10. The remains will be buried by the Actors' Fund in the Fund plot in the Cemetery of the Evergreens." Any connection between this William Booth and that of the Yiddish performance seems purely coincidental.

29. Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1966), 200.

30. Ibid., 213.

31. "Adler" is Yiddish for eagle, and The Great Eagle became a nickname for Jacob Adler. This nickname was sometimes rendered in the Hebrew, "Nesher hagadol."

32. Moyshe Zeifert, "Alts tsulib parnose," Di idishe bine, 17 December 1909.

33. Shylock would eventually attract a great deal of attention in the Yiddish theatre: see Chapter 6.

34. "Shekspir's biografye," Di yidishe gazeten, 22 and 29 June 1894.

35. These included a benefit that began a week of performances at the Standard Theatre in Philadelphia on June 12, and three performances at the Thalia in August to begin the 1894-95 season.

36. Der teglekher herald, 11 September 1894.

37. Der teglekher herald, 19 September 1894.

38. Goldberg would go on to translate other Shakespeare plays, as well as Uncle Tom's Cabin and Hauptmann's The Sunken Bell, for Thomashefsky.

39. William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, in The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), III.i.102-103. Subsequent English quotations from Shakespeare's plays come from this edition unless noted otherwise; their line numbers will be supplied in the text.

40. William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, translated by Mikhl Goldberg. Perlmutter Collection, YIVO Archives, 1302 and 1302B (the former being a slightly abridged version of the latter). Page numbers refer to text 1302B unless stated otherwise, and will be cited in the text.
41. Jacob Mestel, Undzer teater (New York: YKUF, 1943), 38.
42. Der teglekher herald, 30 October 1894.
43. Zeifert, "Di geshikhte fun idishn teater," 40-42.
44. Der teglekher herald, 29 January 1895.
45. Dr. Kritikus, "Yulius Tsezar," Der yidisher puck, 8 February 1895, 171.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid., 172.
49. These translations were by I. J. Schwartz (New York: Forward, 1918) and I. Goldberg (Minsk: Melukhe farlag, 1933).
50. Vishnipolski's translation of Julius Caesar (Warsaw: Ginz, 1886) has received scholarly attention in two English articles. Leonard Prager provides an interesting analysis of Vishnipolski's Foreword to the translation, which Prager translates in its entirety, in "Shakespeare in Yiddish," Shakespeare Quarterly 19 (1968), 149-63. Dahlia Kaufman devotes an entire article to this adaptation: "The First Yiddish Translation of Julius Caesar," trans. Elinor Robinson, in The Field of Yiddish, 5th Collection, ed. David Goldberg (New York: YIVO and Northwestern University Press, 1993), 219-42.
51. D. M. Hermalin, Shekspir's oysgevelte verk (New York: Drukerman, 1908), v. The book was reissued in 1909 and 1912.
52. Ibid., vi. The Lambs retell twenty of Shakespeare's plays in their Tales. Hermalin in turn adapts eighteen of their tales for his collection, for some reason leaving out Measure for Measure and Pericles. Also for reasons he does not explain, he includes Shakespeare's poem "The Rape of Lucrece," and adds Julius Caesar to the second and third editions.
53. Charles and Mary Lamb, Tales From Shakespeare (Philadelphia: Bradford and Inskeep, 1813), 7-10.
54. Sol Liptzin, A History of Yiddish Literature (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1972), 10-11.

55. Ibid., 11.

56. The Yeshiva Boy is discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

57. Forverts, 20 October 1903.

58. King Lear, in The Arden Shakespeare, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1972), 180.

59. Kenig Lir, trans. by Mikhl Goldberg. Typescript in the Thomashefsky Collection, #3. Further quotations from this translation will be cited in the text.

CHAPTER 4

SHAKESPEARE JUDAIZED: THE SECOND WAVE

After producing and starring in several Shakespearean translations, Boris Thomashefsky also appeared in several "Judaized" adaptations, in which plots, characters, and settings were made specifically Jewish in the tradition of Gordin's Jewish King Lear. These adaptations often straddle the blurry border between "high" and "low," borrowing images and themes from Shakespeare, but smoothing over many of the subtleties and ambivalences of his plays. The result: modern morality plays climaxing in moments of exaggerated emotion.

Such mixtures were not unique to the Yiddish theatre. As Lawrence Levine has shown in Highbrow/Lowbrow, his study of Shakespeare and other cultural phenomena in nineteenth-century America,

Shakespeare was performed not merely alongside popular entertainment as an elite supplement to it; Shakespeare was performed as an integral part of it. Shakespeare was popular entertainment in nineteenth-century America.

In different ways, Shakespeare was also popular entertainment in turn-of-the-century American Yiddish theatre, a status that did not change substantially until Shakespearean performances began at Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre.²

This chapter examines four Judaized adaptations: Isidore Zolotarevsky's Der yeshive bokher, oder der yidisher Hamlet [The Yeshiva Boy, or the Jewish Hamlet, 1899]; Nakhum Rakov's Di shvve baym seyfer-toyre, oder di yidishe Romeo un Yulia

[The Oath on the Torah, or the Jewish Romeo and Juliet, 1903]; Leon Kobrin's Der blinder muzikant, oder der yidisher Otelio [The Blind Musician, or the Jewish Othello, 1903]; and Di sheyne amerikanerin [The Pretty American, 1910], Thomashefsky's musical adaptation of The Taming of the Shrew. All four were advertised as adaptations of Shakespeare, though the connection sometimes seems all but invisible.³

The first "Judaized" Shakespeare that Thomashefsky presented to American Yiddish audiences was The Yeshiva Boy, by Isidore Zolatarevsky. Whereas Thomashefsky had a strong performance background before he immigrated to America, nothing in Zolatarevsky's early experience indicated that he would one day become known as "The King of Melodrama."⁴ Born Yitskhok Zolatarevsky in Yelizavetgrad, Ukraine, circa 1875, he was orphaned at the age of four and raised by an aunt. He received a minimal Jewish education, but learned Russian and German in school and read Western literature--especially drama--with a voracious appetite.

Zolatarevsky came to America in 1890 and looked up an older brother, Abraham, whom he had never met. He stayed with Abraham in Fall River, Massachusetts, where he began learning Yiddish and English. Abraham belonged to an amateur dramatic club, which Isidore soon joined, making his debut in Goldfadn's Koldunye, the same play Thomashefsky had introduced to American audiences in 1886. Zolatarevsky's first encounter with Yiddish theatre made an indelible impact on him; he took

whatever work came along as long as he could participate in amateur theatricals.

Zolatarevsky's professional theatre career began in 1893, when he appeared as Simeon in Lateiner's Joseph and His Brothers. He toured with a theatre company and eventually became director of a small vaudeville troupe in New England. He filled gaps in the company's repertoire by translating theatre songs from English to Yiddish. He also began translating plays from English to Yiddish, but without success, so in 1895 he went on the road with Gordin's Jewish King Lear in the title role of Dovid Moyshesles. In Montreal, his troupe received such plaudits in Montreal that it drew established actors and led to the first stable Yiddish theatre there. In 1896, Zolatarevsky played comic roles in Baltimore, and then a season with Finkel and Mogulesco in Philadelphia. He wrote his first original play in 1897: The Jewish Volunteer, based on events from the Spanish-American War, a popular topic for Yiddish playwrights at the time. However, Zolatarevsky had little commercial success with his dramatization.⁵

His career finally crossed paths with Thomashefsky during the 1898-99 season, when he sold the star a new play. In her memoirs, Bessie Thomashefsky describes its unexpected success:

We performed the masterpiece, just to get to the end of the season, but the play was a huge hit; audiences rushed to buy tickets and the box office was filled with dollars.

The only shame was that summer was coming and we had to stop playing. The people did not want to let go of

The Yeshiva Boy at all. Later the play was called The Yeshiva Boy or the Jewish Hamlet, and later yet, Hamlet was dropped and just The Yeshiva Boy was left. And to this day, the play brings in a lot of money when it is performed.⁶

Actually, the play premiered on 3 February 1899, a full four months before the end of the season. But Mrs. Thomashefsky is correct in saying that the play ran consistently for the rest of the season; in fact, ads in the Yiddish press announce performances of the play at the Windsor at least once a week from the premiere until the end of May, when theatrical activity slowed down for the summer.

Ironically, for all Zolotarevsky's subsequent notoriety as the author of The Jewish Hamlet, the initial newspaper advertisements indicate neither his authorship nor the play's Shakespearean lineage:

Windsor Theatre
45-47 Bowery
Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings,
The 3rd, 4th and 5th of February
For the first time
--The--
JEWISH MARTYR
or The Yeshiva Boy
Performed by Thomashefsky
Music by Friedsel⁷

Thomashefsky was certainly a big enough star to eclipse many a young playwright, but here, even the composer--albeit a prominent one in the American Yiddish theatre at the time--gets billing where the playwright's name is omitted.

Further down in the advertising columns, however, appears a play more obviously connected to Shakespeare: Der yidisher Hamlet, premiering at the Arch Street Theatre in Philadelphia

on the third and fourth of February. In fact, Der yidisher martirer and Der yidisher Hamlet are one and the same,⁸ but it was Thomashefsky who put Zolatarevsky's play on the theatrical map. The Philadelphia production starred Max Rosenthal, the leading Yiddish actor in that city at the time, as Avigdor; Thomashefsky played Avigdor in New York, where it became a signature role for him. Zolatarevsky himself played the role of Yankl Khazn, a role he wrote specifically for the New York production.⁹

Thomashefsky seems to have romanticized somewhat his initial involvement with The Yeshiva Boy. At the bottom of the title page of a script prepared specifically for a benefit for Zolatarevsky on 13 April 1935, appears a note entitled, "History of Yeshive bokher":

Produced for the first time in Philadelphia by Max Rosenthal--flopped--had to perform another play the second night--Thomashefsky bought the unsuccessful work and the Yeshive bokher lives, and will live as long as I live.¹⁰

The tone of this miniature "history" of the play suggests that Thomashefsky recited it onstage at the beginning of the benefit performance. It also presents Thomashefsky as a sort of theatrical faith healer who brings the play back from the dramaturgic graveyard. The initial newspaper advertisements, however, reveal the "history" to be only partly accurate. The play does seem to have flopped in Philadelphia, since its title quickly disappears from the Arch Street Theatre ads, but Rosenthal and Thomashefsky premiered the play simultaneously.

So while Thomashefsky was undoubtedly instrumental in making the play a success, his production was not the resuscitation of a flop, but more like the successful maintenance of a Siamese twin who just lost his sibling.

The Yeshiva Boy takes place in a Hasidic community in Eastern Europe. The community's spiritual leader, or rebbe, passed away six weeks before the action of the play begins, on the wedding day of Dvoyre, the late rebbe's widow, and Todres, his step-brother. Succession to the position of rebbe often, though not always, follows family ties, and with the late rebbe's son, Avigdor, studying abroad and no announcement by the previous rebbe as to a successor, Todres' followers proclaim him the new leader.

Unlike Shakespeare, Zolatarevsky does not wait to show the usurper's unfitness for his job. Todres, who falls asleep during important meetings, clearly lacks the charisma and intelligence expected of a rebbe. His assistant, Tsalel, has no respect for him, calling him such names as "gazlen" [robber] and "balegole" [wagoner]. Todres always manages to say precisely the opposite of what he should, as when he tells his followers that God has his angels in hell [unter der erd] when he means to say on Earth [af der erd]. His comic ineptitude betrays his inability to lead.

Avigdor returns home from his two years abroad only to learn how radically things have changed:

Oy oy oy oy, I will go crazy. Six weeks after a man's death, and already a wedding. Grass does not yet grow on

my father's grave, and you already dance on it? Not a bit of grass has yet grown on my father's grave, and you are already happy? Stand up when I speak of my father! Stand up! Stand up, Reb Todres, stand up I tell you!

Where Hamlet learns of both his father's death and his mother's remarriage before the audience first sees him, Zolatarevsky shows his hero's immediate reaction to both of these unsettling events; where Hamlet reacts with sardonic asides, Avigdor makes no attempt to conceal his rage.

Like the first act in Gordin's Mirele Efros, Act I of The Yeshiva Boy ends with a son paying tribute to his deceased father. Avigdor's prayer serves as both a tribute to the deceased and a scolding of those who are celebrating too soon. He has his mother remove her wedding veil and has all the lights extinguished except for one candle, with which he says kaddish, the prayer for the dead. When he completes the prayer, Avigdor throws open the curtains covering the ark where the Torah is held and sees his father--not anthropomorphized as a ghost, but purely in Avigdor's imagination. The act ends with Avigdor exclaiming, "My father! My father! My father!"

With the beginning of Act II, Zolatarevsky again takes a page out of Gordin by setting the action during Purim, the same holiday that begins The Jewish King Lear. As in Gordin, the festive aura of that holiday belies the dire events to come. At first, though, it seems that sweetness may prevail, for Avigdor and Esther, Tsalel's daughter, are about to sign their marriage vows. But the mood changes when Avigdor's

friend gives him a letter from the late rebbe:

I had a step-brother, younger than I by twenty years. Todres is his name. For the last ten years I noticed that my wife was not indifferent to him. I kept silent, kept it to myself, until one day I saw them together in a way that made me from sickness and weakness go dumb on the spot! I am dying before my time--take vengeance on that man, have pity on the woman, she is a mother.

The letter serves all of the expository function of the Ghost scenes in Hamlet without any of the sense of the supernatural. The hero's father has spared himself the need of returning from the grave to describe the circumstances of his death; he had the foresight to commit them to paper before he died.

Ironically, while Zolatarevsky's play takes place in more overtly religious surroundings than Shakespeare's, he distances the action from the otherworldly realm by making it explainable in human terms. The shift from a Christian world view to a Jewish one does not in itself account for the absence of the Ghost from Zolatarevsky's script. Jewish folklore teems with spirits and demons, but in reinventing the world of Hamlet, Zolatarevsky was communicating to an audience whose sensibility differed from Shakespeare's audience not only in which religion they practiced, but also in how they viewed religious belief itself.

The English Jewish writer Israel Zangwill touched on this shift in outlook in his comic sketch, "The Yiddish 'Hamlet,'" in which a Lower East Side poet adapts Hamlet for a Yiddish theatre in New York and asks, "Now, how can a ghost affect a modern audience which no longer believes in ghosts?"¹¹ The

poet's rhetorical question indicates the atmosphere of skepticism, pragmatism, and positivism in which his audience--like Zolatarevsky's--is steeped. That viewpoint also surfaces in a contemporary newspaper article; in summarizing Hamlet, the writer sees fit to explain the need for the Ghost:

It was the only way to acquaint the young prince with the circumstances of his father's death. Do not forget that in those days, there were no detectives or coroners' inquests, and a poet had to come up with a another means of suggestion if he wanted to disclose a secret.¹²

By replacing the Ghost with other devices, Zolatarevsky avoided the need for such an explanation.

Any potential harmony established at the beginning of Act II begins to disintegrate after Avigdor reads his father's letter. Todres says he will throw Avigdor out of the house. Avigdor responds by throwing the foolish rebbe off his rabbinical chair, a taste of things to come. Todres and Tsalel bribe the town's innkeeper to get rid of Avigdor, and as Todres writes up the contract, Tsalel makes all the necessary spelling and mathematical corrections.

The letter from Avigdor's father serves one more function achieved by Shakespeare's Ghost in possibly unhinging the son's reason. Esther, like Ophelia, wonders why her betrothed has changed so much--a thought intensified when Avigdor comes in ranting about the infidelities of women, then apologizing and saying he loves her. When Dvoyre enters, he speaks wildly again and takes his mother to task for marrying Todres. Like Gertrude, she initially denies any wrongdoing but then breaks

down and begs his forgiveness. Later, however, she does something that we never see Gertrude do--attack Todres for having "killed my mother-heart."

Intrigues against Avigdor continue. When Tsalel reports that Avigdor is about to deliver a speech against Todres and himself, Todres tells him to bribe people to hurt Avigdor and keep him from speaking, but Tsalel says he has no money left. The innkeeper announces that he informed the police that Avigdor is a socialist, and has papers to substantiate the claim. But for some reason that defies logical explanation, the innkeeper leaves the papers behind, and Avigdor's friend, who has overheard the intrigue, grabs them and stashes them in his shirt. Clumsy moments like this show Zolatarevsky's lack of experience at writing melodramas; he has the ingredients, but sometimes has trouble combining them artfully.

The situation grows more and more violent. The synagogue sexton enters, having been beaten by Todres' followers for speaking out against their rebbe. Todres again calls for the stoning of Avigdor, whom he deems a heretic. It is a thoroughly un-Jewish punishment, and betrays Todres's lack of either erudition or piety. Dvoyre tries to intercede on her son's behalf, and when Todres stops her, she escapes him by jumping out the window.

A bloodied Avigdor is brought in by a crowd. A Russian policeman accuses Avigdor of being a nihilist, but when the soldiers find nothing against him, Avigdor's friend hands over

the papers and informs on Todres and the innkeeper, who are arrested. Dvoyre is brought in, bloody, and manages to give Avigdor his father's ring before she dies. Avigdor does not react at first, and an onlooker concludes, "Oy vey, it seems he has lost his mind." But finally he returns to his senses and cries, "Mama! Mama! Mama!" Both this lament and the Avigdor's parallel cries for his father at the end of Act I depend upon Judaism's emphasis on family unity--unity that was often disrupted by immigration to America. The finales of Acts I and III must have been particularly effective with audiences whose families were often broken up, temporarily or permanently, on the road to the New World.

Act IV takes place exactly one year later. After his mother's death, Avigdor was committed to an insane asylum, from which he ran away two weeks earlier. His friends suspect that he may return to visit his mother's grave on the anniversary of her death. Esther, whose health has suffered greatly from all the anxiety, enters disoriented from a visit to Dvoyre's grave. When someone reports that Avigdor has been spotted nearby, Esther dies from the shock.

The final scene finds Avigdor at his parents' graves when Esther's body is carried onstage. Tsalel enters and accuses Avigdor of having killed his daughter, but Avigdor insists that he loves her so much that he wants to be buried with her. However, she left a note asking that he say kaddish over her. Avigdor assists in leading the kaddish while standing in the

grave. He comes out, says that they can only be united in death now, and falls dead. The chorus sings, "Blessed is the true judge."

The Yeshiva Boy, for all its flaws, quickly became a staple in the American Yiddish repertoire. Little of its language could be called poetic, the intrigue is obviously contrived, and characters have a terrible habit of keeling over and dying, upon the slightest provocation, at dramatically convenient moments. But taken on its own terms rather than on its merit (or lack thereof) as a reworking of Hamlet, The Yeshiva Boy had much to recommend it to contemporary audiences. Zolatarevsky strove for grand sentimental effects rather than metaphysical musings; for instance, the final moments of three of the four acts leave the audience weeping for a deceased member of Avigdor's family: he prays for his father at the end of Act I, cries for his mother at the end of Act III, and dies after saying a prayer for his beloved at the end of the play. This manner of uniting the lovers in death recalls the finale of Mikhl Goldberg's translation of Romeo and Juliet--one of the only commercially successful Yiddish translations of Shakespeare in the 1890s--which ended with Romeo's dying lines.

The Yeshiva Boy also offers both comic relief and social commentary, often simultaneously. Zolatarevsky gave his audience the opportunity both to laugh at and condemn characters whose values clashed with their own, especially

where religious practice was concerned. Hasidim and other Orthodox Jews decried Yiddish theatre; for one thing, it caused Jews to break the Sabbath--the very evening, in fact, when The Yeshiva Boy premiered. In the play, hypocritical orthodoxy is responsible for tyranny, adultery, and even death, if not exactly murder. By making the inversion of the natural order of human interaction a by-product of Hasidism, The Yeshiva Boy affirms the non-traditional Judaism of its audience, where theatre is acceptable, but tyranny is not.

Louis Friedsel's music undoubtedly had a lot to do with the play's success. Joseph Rumshinsky, himself one of the most prominent Yiddish theatre composers, had high praise for Friedsel's melody for the kaddish at the end of Act I:

If Louis Friedsel had written nothing besides the prelude to the kaddish from Yeshive bokher, he would have earned the reputation he had at the time. Those eight bars played on the viola and clarinet always gave me--and still do to this day--the feeling of death, but without fear: something of eternal rest.¹³

Historian Sholem Perlmutter echoed this assessment, adding that Friedsel "poured out through the music all the black clouds that oppressed his heart, the eternal groan of man's life when it comes to a tragic end."¹⁴

The popularity of the music from The Yeshiva Boy would ultimately transcend its onstage life. The play's graveyard finale proved appropriate for reasons that extended beyond the walls of the theatre, for both Friedsel and Zolatarevsky were remembered in death, as in life, for their contributions to the play. At Friedsel's funeral in 1923, Joseph Rumshinsky

led a chorus assembled from the Cantors' Union, the Actors' Union, and the Choral Union in singing the play's closing melody, which had become famous as a death march. And although he went on to write dozens of melodramas, many of them commercially successful, Zolatarevsky's tombstone commemorates his legendary Jewish Hamlet: "Here lies Yitskhok Zolatarevsky, the creator of Yeshive bokher."¹⁵

Shortly after the premiere of The Yeshiva Boy, a Yiddish playwright whose success at writing melodramas would rival that of Zolatarevsky came to the United States from London. Nakhum Rakov, born in Lithuania in 1866, headed west in 1887 for political reasons and settled in London. He gained an entree to the theatre via the prompter's box, which he occupied in theatres managed by Max Rosenthal, Rudolph Marks, and Jacob Adler. But as Rakov's English improved, he took to adapting plays from English to Yiddish in the superficial manner of the time: figuring out "how to turn a priest into a rabbi."¹⁶ For his first plays, he parlayed current events into dramatic form, in such works as The Greenhorn in London, The Strike in London, and Captain Dreyfus, or, Emile Zola.

Around 1902,¹⁷ Rakov left London for New York, where he found that such writers as Hurwitz, Zeifert, and Zolatarevsky had already capitalized on the most interesting events of the day for their plays. Rakov's first play in America, In Wild Russia (1902), brought little money into the box office, and he soon turned to Shakespeare for a model.

Rakov's The Oath on the Torah, or, The Jewish Romeo and Juliet, opened at the People's Theatre in New York on 10 April 1903, the same day that another Rakov play, The Idler, opened at the Thalia.¹⁸ Like The Yeshiva Boy and The Jewish King Lear, Rakov's play transplants Shakespeare's story to a Jewish milieu, but he stays much closer than to the action and even the speeches of the original. Whereas Gordin and Zolotarevsky use Shakespeare as a springboard from which to leap into their own stories, one can always recognize Romeo and Juliet just below the surface of The Oath on the Torah, though Rakov makes some drastic changes of his own.

The Oath on the Torah begins on Simchat Torah, one of the most festive holidays in the Jewish calendar. But on this day when Jews traditionally carry the Torah scrolls in a joyous dance around the synagogue, the action begins with two groups of Jews throwing rocks at each other. Gordin had shown these factions--misnagdim versus Hasidim--at loggerheads in The Jewish King Lear, but all the violence in Gordin's play was verbal. The Yeshiva Boy contained real violence, but kept it offstage. Now, however, the rocks actually take to the air, supplanting the war of words that follows Shakespeare's Prologue and moving right to the physical confrontation. As in Shakespeare, though, nobody suffers any injury yet, and the misnagdim leave.

Shortly after the opening skirmish, the audience meets Raphael, the only child of the Hasidic rebbe. Raphael

confesses to his friends Itsikl and Binyomin that he is in love, and Itsikl teases him in the manner of Mercutio. Rather than conjure up Mercutio's pagan imagery of Queen Mab, however, Itsikl waxes Biblical:

And just because you're in love, does that mean you have to sigh? Just go to your father and say, "Papa, I want to get married," and [he] will send Gedalye the sexton throughout the land to choose a bride, just as our forefather Abraham did by sending his slave Eliezer to find a wife for Isaac. And Reb Gedalye will find some Khavele, or a Rivkele, or another girl standing by a carriage and feeding a goat and you'll get married and . . .¹⁹

And like Romeo, Raphael cuts short his friend's speech.

But Binyomin and Itsikl continue to tease their friend about his lovesickness, and suggest an antidote: to come to Simchat Torah services, where he will see that his beloved is but one among many beautiful girls. However, he resists their suggestion. Various Hasidim and misnagdim bring Act I to a close not by throwing stones, but by an activity far more conducive to the finale of an act of an operetta: singing the praises of their leaders. This ending completes an act focusing far more on the feud than on the love story; indeed, we have not yet met Sheyndele, the Juliet to Raphael's Romeo.

Sheyndele first appears at the beginning of Act II, set in her father's house. As in Shakespeare, she discusses marriage with her grandmother (Rakov's equivalent of the Nurse) and her mother. She agrees to marry whomever her parents choose for her, but plants the seed of rebellion when she expresses her wish to attend services at the Hasidic

synagogue. Her father, not surprisingly, forbids her.

Where the tragic romance of Shakespeare's lovers indirectly shows the folly of the fight that keeps them apart, Rakov's lovers directly indict their parents for carrying on such mindless hatred. Sheyndele calls the quarrel ridiculous; after all, the Hasidim are Jews too. When her father reminds her that the Vilna Gaon, the most prominent eighteenth-century opponent of Hasidism, said that misnagdim must not marry Hasidim, Sheyndele concludes that the Vilna Gaon must have been "a bad man," thus dismissing a figure widely considered to have been "one of the greatest spiritual and intellectual leaders of Jewry in modern times."²⁰ But as in The Yeshiva Boy, religiosity does not necessarily equal goodness. Sheyndele gets away with labeling a great religious leader "bad" because in spite of his phenomenal erudition, what he most immediately represents to her--and by extension, to those in the audience sympathetic to her plight--is a contribution to the enmity that keeps kindred spirits apart.

Sheyndele ignores her father's prohibition and goes to the Hasidic synagogue. A reviewer for an English-language paper commented perceptively on Rakov's ability to find a Jewish idiom in which to bring his lovers together:

Each holiday finds [the Orthodox Jew] in the synagogue in his best attire, giving free vent to his love and all the noble feelings which animate the breast of man. It is fitting, then, that in translating Shakespeare into Yiddish the author should replace the Capulet ballroom by the synagogue.²¹

Since dancing plays a prominent role in the Simchat Torah

festivities, this holiday provides an especially apt parallel to the Capulet ball. And just as Romeo and Juliet end up dancing together, Raphael and Sheyndele steal a moment alone: "Then there is the procession around the altar, which resolves into a choral dance of men and women, the younger men breaking into an ecstatic pas seul. . . . And so, when the tide of religious joy surges to one side, [Raphael and Sheyndele] meet at a corner of the altar and kiss."²²

The balcony, like the ball, belongs to the synagogue, where Juliet ascends to the women's balcony and Romeo stands below at the altar. In a variation on Juliet's query, "What's in a name?" Sheyndele asks, "Raphael, my Raphael, why did God fill our fathers' hearts with hatred and their children's hearts with love?" She descends from the balcony to the altar, the focal point of the synagogue and site of the lamp symbolically called the eternal light, "representing the indestructibility of Jewish faith and Jewish life."²³ The staging of the oath underscores how this symbolism relates to the eternal love between Raphael and Sheyndele, as Raphael holds "the Eternal Light in one hand, the fingers of his love . . . in the other."²⁴

While the lovers create this symbolic tableau, they make their vow on the Torah as Raphael invokes sacred witnesses:

Zayn zol der omed un der ner tomed
 Eydes af imer, mir sheydn zikh nimer.
 Zayn zol di toyre un di menoyre
 Eydes gor tsu unzer shvue.

[Let the cantor's desk and the eternal light

Be witnesses forever, we'll never part.
 Let the Torah and the menorah
 Be witnesses to our oath.]

The oath itself recalls that of Romeo and Juliet; its form recalls another prototype as well. Avrom Goldfadn's operetta Shulamis, one of the most popular plays in the Yiddish repertoire. Early in that play, Shulamis, lost in the desert near Jerusalem, falls into a well, from which she is rescued by Avshalom. Naturally, they fall in love, and swear by the well and a wild cat that happens by:

O der brunem, o der!
 Un di kats, o di, o!
 Zoln zayn, vi ikh shver,
 Eydes tsu unzer shvue.²⁵

[O, the well and the cat!
 Let them be, as I swear,
 Witnesses to our oath.]

Given Rakov's experience as a prompter, he undoubtedly knew Shulamis well, and must have known what he was doing when he echoed this scene that had charmed a generation of Yiddish audiences on both sides of the Atlantic.

After Sheyndele spurns Ephraim, the suitor her parents have chosen for her, and quarrels violently with her father, the action moves to the synagogue. Naturally, Shakespeare's Friar would be out of place here; Rakov therefore changes him to a Cantor, who leads a melodic ending to Act II as he makes the lovers' union official in song.

Act III opens with an exchange that could come right out of a Yiddish operetta. Rakov presents a lighter side of the feud: Itsik/Mercutio asks two misnagdim if they want to become

Hasidim. They reply that they will when they see the rebbe perform a miracle. This leads to a musical parody of the countless Hasidic folktales describing the wonder-working powers of various rebbes. In the first verse, Itsik sings of a situation common in such tales. A woman who has been barren for the ten years of her marriage goes to see the rebbe, and soon bears twins. But the misnagdim use the second verse to turn the miracle inside out, making one of the twins blind and the other lame. In the third verse, the rebbe reveals himself as a fraud when he works the "miracle" of giving the lame child perfect vision and the blind one healthy legs. Critic John Corbin remarked of another comic interlude shortly after this one, "It is not pretty, all this, but the audience enjoy it, and it refreshes them for the . . . tragic scenes to come." Yet Corbin refrains from dismissing the scene's theatrical merit as he reminds his readers,

In matters of this kind it is easy to be all too superior. Who was it that wrote the passages of bawdry in the original "Romeo and Juliet," the devil-portering scenes in "Macbeth"? In its naive and unabashed expression of the popular taste the Yiddish plays of the Bowery are on the precise plane of the plays that delighted the Bankside under Elizabeth.²⁶

As with the raucous Shakespearean scenes that Corbin invokes, the action in Rakov's play quickly turns more serious. Since he omits an equivalent to Tybalt, Rakov allows for no justification to have Raphael banished. Instead, sheer pragmatism makes Raphael decide to leave town. The Cantor points out that Raphael has no means of supporting Sheyndele,

and offers him letters of introduction to friends in Vienna, where he can study for two or three years in order to be able to support himself. Raphael agrees, and the Cantor promises to help Sheyndele keep her parents at bay until Raphael can return and make the marriage public.

Rakov, as he has done elsewhere, finds a Jewish replacement for Juliet's "Gallop apace" soliloquy by having Sheyndele sing from the Song of Songs while waiting for her grandmother to return from the Cantor's with news of Raphael. It is a fitting equivalent, for while Jewish, it expresses eroticism in a manner comparable to the sexually charged imagery of Juliet's monologue.²⁷

After her father rejects Sheyndele's plea to break off the arranged match, Sheyndele meets Raphael under the moonlight, where they take leave of each other and embrace. Ephraim enters just in time to witness this, and causes an uproar when Sheyndele's family and other misnagdim arrive. When Yerukhem learns of his daughter's tryst, he threatens to strangle her, but Raphael intervenes: "You dare not lay a hand on my wife." The grandmother confirms the revelation, and Sheyndele's father faints as the curtain falls.

Six months pass between Acts III and IV. Raphael has sent many letters from Vienna, but his father-in-law has destroyed them all, and Sheyndele's distress has grown exponentially. Her father has also sent a follower to Vienna to bribe Raphael to sign divorce papers. When he receives a

report that the divorce is official, Sheyndele's father tells her that she may go to Vienna on the condition that if Raphael no longer wants her, she will return and marry Ephraim. But as she is preparing for the journey, the divorce papers arrive in the mail. Sheyndele comes out of her swoon long enough to say, "Father, Mother, congratulate me. I am free, free."

The scene changes to the Cantor's quarters, where he learns of the divorce and agrees with Itsik's conclusion that the papers must be fraudulent. Raphael's friends resolve to bring him home immediately in order to stop Sheyndele's wedding to Ephraim, scheduled for the next day. Meanwhile, the Cantor goes to Yerukhem and insists that the wedding be called off, since the divorce papers are false. However, plans for the wedding proceed in spite of the forgery.

The play concludes with an aborted wedding ceremony. The guests lead Sheyndele and Ephraim onstage and leave them alone. Traditional Jewish weddings do not leave the bride and groom alone at the beginning of the ceremony, but since Rakov's plot does not allow for the moment to come later, he creates a variation of the law of yichud:

The symbolic consummation of the wedding takes place in a private room after the ceremony. This is not a custom, but a firm requirement of the law that must be testified to by witnesses. It is the final act . . . that seals the marriage. When the couple emerges from yichud, they are man and wife.²⁸

During their brief moment alone, Sheyndele tells Ephraim that he can have her body, but not her heart. Rakov creates an anti-yichud, not only in its placement in the order of the

wedding, but also in its function. Instead of uniting with her future husband, Sheyndele uses the time alone with her groom to establish her autonomy. As soon as he leaves, however, she takes a different tack altogether, deciding that she cannot live any longer and swallowing a glass of poison as she declares, "Raphael, I lived for you and die for you."

The guests return at this point, and the blessing over the couple begins. It is interrupted by the entrance of Raphael, his friends, and the Cantor. Raphael and Sheyndele embrace, and she dies in his arms. He mourns her, but not so hysterically as to be unable to derive a lesson from her death: "Look at her, see your sacrifice . . . You thought you could buy off a person's heart. No, money cannot buy someone's heart. Look, look: dead, my Sheyndele, my wife."

Raphael's father arrives at the point where the play is supposed to reach the pinnacle of tragedy; his entrance line would be all but impossible to deliver seriously today: "Raphael, you've come all this way and didn't even see your father but came straight to your enemy?"²⁹ Raphael responds didactically, "You see, father, the fruit of your hatred." And as if to punctuate his point, Raphael shoots himself. Standing over the corpses, Sheyndele's grandmother recalls how the lovers took their vow and concludes, "And so they stay united. They kept their oath."

The oath most immediately represents the lovers' devotion to each other in the face of adversity, but their vow works on

an allegorical level as well. The family feud that makes it impossible for Raphael and Sheyndele to live together in peace involves millions of combatants. In purely quantitative terms, then, the lovers' oath is greater than that of Romeo and Juliet. It is an affirmation of the essential unity of the Jewish people in spite of circumstances that have interrupted that unity.

Just a few months after the premiere of The Oath on the Torah, Thomashefsky advertised another Shakespearean adaptation: Leon Kobrin's The Blind Musician, or, the Jewish Othello. As much as Jacob Gordin may have inspired Zolatarevsky and Rakov, his influence on Kobrin's dramaturgy was more direct. Like Gordin, Kobrin wrote sketches in Russian before coming to the United States and gained the esteem of New York's Yiddish intellectuals with his fiction before becoming a playwright.

Kobrin was born in the Byelorussian city of Vitebsk on 15 March 1872. He received a traditional Jewish education, but became increasingly attracted to Russian literature. By age fifteen, Kobrin had sent several stories in Russian to the Russian Jewish journal Voskhod, though they were not published. Kobrin emigrated to the United States in 1892 and soon began publishing stories in Yiddish. In the mid-1890s, his writing began to win admirers among New York's Yiddish intellectuals, and in 1898, he published his first novel: Yankl Boyle, with an introduction by Jacob Gordin.³⁰

Kobrin also started taking his first steps toward becoming a playwright. In his memoirs, Kobrin recalled being among the audience of Lower East Side intellectuals who attended a series of Gordin lectures in Russian on the plays of Shakespeare, Molière, and Ibsen during the winter of 1898-1899. A Russian in the audience asked why this primarily Jewish audience was learning about great Gentile writers instead of trying to develop new Jewish ones--a query that inspired the founding of the "Fraye yidishe folksbine" [Free Yiddish People's Stage], whose purpose was to improve the artistic level of the Yiddish theatre. Charter members included Gordin, Kobrin, and Joel Entin, a Columbia literature student who would eventually become one of the most important Yiddish theatre critics.³¹

Despite its charter, the Fraye yidishe folksbine soon began preparing a production of Ibsen's Enemy of the People, in a translation by Gordin. Meanwhile, Kobrin read his first play, Mina, to Entin, who was sufficiently impressed to try to get it produced. Kobrin and Entin have different recollections about what happened next, but they agree that the play was brought to the attention of the Fraye yidishe folksbine. Kobrin says Gordin liked the play, but found "some dramaturgic flaws." Entin, on the other hand, writes that Gordin attacked the play "without pity." In any case, the ensuing debate between Kobrin's supporters--the majority in the room, according to both accounts--and Gordin's faction,

led the latter group to withdraw from the organization that evening, thereby bringing about its instant demise.³²

Ironically, Gordin later wrote to Kobrin at Jacob Adler's behest and offered to help shape Mina into a stageworthy play. According to Entin, Gordin wrote terse scenarios for the play in Russian, upon which Kobrin elaborated in Yiddish. Gordin took (or was given) most of the credit on the posters announcing the play, which opened at the Windsor Theatre on 13 January 1899. However, the Yiddish theatre community in New York knew that Kobrin supplied more than just the "idea" for which the ads credited him, and Mina launched his career as a dramatist.³³ By the time he wrote The Blind Musician for Thomashefsky in 1903, Kobrin had written for each of the "big three" American Yiddish actor/managers--Adler, Kessler, and Thomashefsky--and could boast both critical and box-office success with such works as Nature, Man, and Beast (1900) and Paradise Lost (1902).

The Blind Musician premiered at the People's Theatre in New York on 6 November 1903--just two weeks after Mikhel Goldberg's short-lived King Lear premiered at the same theatre. Kobrin took the main title from Vladimir Korolenko's novel The Blind Musician (1886), which was familiar to many Yiddish readers by the time Kobrin's play opened. The novel had been serialized in a Boston Yiddish weekly, Der emes, in 1895, and was reprinted in the Forverts in the spring of 1903. Perhaps this reprinting gave Kobrin the idea to make an overt

reference in his title to two works that would be well known to Yiddish audiences by the time his play premiered.³⁴

In fact, Kobrin's play resembles neither of its ostensible sources so much as it does Gordin's Jewish King Lear and Mirele Efros. Korolenko's protagonist, Pyotr, blind from birth, is raised in the country by his mother and uncle, finds his calling in performing the peasant music of his region, and ultimately marries his childhood sweetheart. Kobrin's title character, Yosef Finkelshteyn, a classical composer living in New York City, has been gradually losing his eyesight, and constantly bemoans his affliction from the moment it sets in. His likeness to Pyotr lies only in the externals--that he is blind and is a musician. Similarly, he resembles Othello only in that he erroneously accuses his wife of infidelity, strangles her, and repents his mistake. Beyond those parallels, Kobrin's play bears so little resemblance to Othello that it hardly seems to merit the name "adaptation," but The Blind Musician's subtitle, as well as traces of its plot, advertise its Shakespearean roots.

Shakespeare's plays had been retold to fit contemporary Jewish life before, but Kobrin was apparently the first Yiddish playwright to adapt a Shakespeare play to an American setting. His characters speak in the American Yiddish idiom, using such expressions as "never mind," "sure," and "Don't be so fresh." The critic Shmuel Niger, in discussing Kobrin's respect for the Yiddish language (not the norm among Yiddish

playwrights at the turn of the century), explained that Kobrin used Americanisms because "he wanted, as a naturalist, to be 'true to life,' not because he was untrue to his linguistic instrument."³⁵ In establishing the play's American setting, Kobrin makes use of environment as well. Carnegie Hall, the site of Yosef's anticipated debut as composer, hovers promisingly over most of the play.

The play opens in the home of Feygele Finkelshteyn, a wealthy widow, whose mother in-law, Etl, reflects back on her life as she looks forward to her grandson Yosef's wedding. While the play's opening monologue provides the sort of bald exposition typical of Yiddish dramas at the time, Kobrin shows his ability to convey vital information artfully, as when Etl muses sadly over her travels "from Minsk to New York, from my husband's grave to my son's grave."³⁶

By 1903, opening a Yiddish play with Jewish customs had itself become customary. Here, the occasion is a wedding; Bessie, Yosef's sister, and Sam, her fiancé, bringing in lights for the wedding canopy. Bessie shows her grandmother her arm, red from the pinches of Michael Pomp, the foreman in her mother's shop. Arrogant bully though he is, Michael constantly announces, "I hate bluffs." The Yiddish neologism "bluffer," coined from the English "bluff," can mean a congenital boaster, a cheat, or a chronic deceiver, among other things.³⁷ If Michael is so brazen as to brag that he is not a braggart, to what depths might he stoop in secret?

When Michael picks a fight with Sam, Bessie urges her fiancé to fight back, reminding him, "You told me you can fight like Fitz"--an allusion to the British boxer Bob Fitzsimmons, who won world titles in three different weight classes between 1891 and 1903.³⁶ When Michael tries to kick Sam, the latter turns the bout into a lesson in American manners: "Say, don't fight like a greenhorn . . . An American fights with his hands, not with his feet." Michael's un-American style of fighting underscores the notion that it is ungentlemanly as well.

Some of the relationships in the play echo both Gordin and Shakespeare. Etl left most of her fortune to her son, whose gratitude his wife did not share--a situation Yiddish audiences would recognize from Mirele Efros, if not from King Lear itself. Feygele's marriage to Michael a bit later in the play hearkens back to those of Gertrude/Claudius and Dvoyre/Todres in being an unwise match that ultimately causes harm to the son. Mikhl Goldberg toned down the sexuality of Hamlet in his translation, but Kobrin puts an image in Yosef's mouth that, with a slight emendation, could easily be uttered by Hamlet: "Mother, your bed is polluted with shame and with the blood of your children."

The central theme of blindness also recalls both Lear and The Jewish King Lear. Unlike Korolenko's protagonist, but like both Gloucester and Dovid Moyshelas, Yosef has his sight as the action of the play begins. His mother wants to marry

him off while he still can see, and has deceitfully told him that the doctor said his eyes will heal on their own. Feygele, with a combination of Gertrude's lasciviousness and Goneril's and Regan's lack of family feeling, candidly announces that she does not want to take care of her son for the rest of her life.

Act I ends with the combination of marriage and mourning used so effectively in both Mirele Efros and The Yeshiva Boy. Guests enter and dance, and then listen to the memorial prayer "El mole rakhamim," for which Yosef has composed a new melody. Kobrin heightens the sentimentality further, for as the prayer comes to an end, Yosef realizes that his blindness is now total: "Rosa, grandmother, where are you all? I don't see you any more, it is dark around me . . . darkest night, I am blind." He falls, and so does the curtain.

It is a highly contrived moment, of course, but a potential coup de théâtre for an audience who, as the Yiddish expression goes, "licked their fingers" at moments like this. Besides hearkening back to Shakespeare, Gordin, and Korolenko, the theme of blindness may have struck a deep chord with an audience comprised largely of recent immigrants, whose entry into the promised land at the turn of the century hinged largely on the health of their eyes:

At this time, trachoma, a severe and contagious form of conjunctivitis that can cause blindness, was widespread among the European emigrating classes, and--though it was curable--the United States authorities regarded its presence in an arriving immigrant as grounds for immediate deportation. There was, consequently, a

separate station for eye inspection, and the quick though necessarily uncomfortable maneuver performed there by the examiner . . . was to become a virtual medieval horror in immigrant folklore, all the more so because the possibility of rejection at this point was frighteningly real.³⁹

This ordeal, recent history for much of Kobrin's audience, could lead them to empathize with Yosef's plight all the more strongly.

Act II begins three months later, on a pretty autumn morning in a back parlor at Feygele's. Cigarettes and cards lie strewn about the messy room, with empty bottles and glasses on the table. Michael and Feygele have gotten married, but he is as unruly as ever. He tells Rosa that her beauty is wasted on a blind man; after she rebuffs him, he flirts with the maid. But Feygele walks in on them and fires the girl immediately. During the ensuing argument, Michael tells Feygele that he would much rather have a young wife like Rosa, whose beauty could give a man apoplexy. Ultimately, though, the couple reconcile and Michael promises to behave.

Meanwhile, Yosef's self-pity foreshadows the undoing of his own marriage; in one of his weaker moments, he pedantically tells Rosa:

They say that the great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky felt the greatest pleasure when he had a toothache. You seem to seek the same sort of pleasure, but such pleasure is sick, unnatural. I want you to have natural pleasure, but I can't give it to you. Rosele, your love for me is nothing more than a toothache. How it tortures me, how it torments me! How much longer can you suffer and savor this toothache?

The so-called "toothache" threatens to decay further at the

slightest provocation, which comes, of course, in the form of Michael Pomp. While Yosef gives the family a preview of the love song he has composed for his Carnegie Hall debut, Michael stealthily approaches Rosa and kisses her. Yosef, his other senses heightened to compensate for his loss of vision, senses something amiss, but Rosa tries to spare her husband any unnecessary discomfiture by keeping silent. Her plan backfires, though, when the jealous Feygele exposes her husband. Rosa, confident that her innocence speaks for itself, refuses to defend herself. Yosef unconvincingly insists on his wife's innocence, but in an echo of the closing moment of Act I, he falls to the ground in torment, the physical darkness that precipitated his earlier fall now intensified by an emotional morass as well.

Act III takes place three days later in a front room at Feygele's. Unlike Desdemona, Rosa sees her husband's jealousy in its early stages, and having no patience for his unjust accusations, she has moved back to her father's house. Yosef pours his restlessness into the piano, although it is only six o'clock in the morning. When Michael returns drunk from a successful night of gambling, Yosef flies at him and knocks him down.⁴⁰ Etl runs in and finds her grandson on the ground, and he complains to her that everyone knows that Rosa really belongs to Michael.

Yosef gets a second chance with Rosa, but she returns to him only to find him more suspicious than ever, and decides

that they can be together no longer. She does agree to stay until after the concert, however, and he proclaims as if she were not there, "She stays . . . yes . . . her bloody throat." He grabs her by the throat, she screams, and he pulls her to him, bringing Act III to its puzzling conclusion.

In spite of Yosef's strange behavior, Rosa is still with him as the curtain goes up on Act IV. She sleeps through the ominous thunder and lightning, but he cannot, and when she awakens, he asks her to sing his love song to try to calm him. But it has just the opposite effect, and he cries: "False! False! That was created out of self-deception! I should not have created a love song, but a song about a deceived, blind artist!" He tears up the music, a bit of violence that begets greater violence, for like Othello, he strangles his wife, then immediately regrets the act. His cries rouse the rest of the household, and when his mother asks, "Yosef, what have you done?" he responds bitterly, "You have eyes; you can see. Mama, be a mother at least and strangle me." A policeman arrives to arrest Yosef, who tears himself away to fall upon Rosa's corpse as the final curtain falls.

The Blind Musician met with mixed critical reception. The Fraye arbeter shtime ran a two-part review praising various aspects of the production, starting with Kobrin's treatment of the theme of jealousy:

In this regard he followed closely in the footsteps of old Shakespeare, but the jealousy that Kobrin depicts in his drama expresses itself to us in a stronger, more passionate form, since it is the jealousy of a blind man.

Love, goes an adage, is blind. The nature of jealousy, however, is that it makes you see things that never existed. . . . Such jealousy, be it ever so passionate, always has a comic element. . . . With a blind man, the comic element falls away, and we have before us the terrible feeling of jealousy in all its horror.⁴¹

Indeed, by having eliminated the elaborate villainy of a Iago, Kobrin needs a device like blindness to provide the etiology of the protagonist's jealousy.

At first glance, an Othello without a Iago seems ill-advised, since he takes such a central role in orchestrating his master's downfall, and does so with such wit and enthusiasm. Kobrin's erstwhile friend Joel Entin⁴² was not so amicable toward the play in his Forverts review, and noted that the absence of a villain like Iago led Kobrin to contrive "caprices" for the otherwise exemplary Yosef in order to move the plot along:

But even capriciousness is not enough to turn Yosef into a Jewish Othello.

Shakespeare's Othello believed bad things of his Desdemona because of Iago, the smartest, and as Othello believes, the noblest person in the drama. But Yosef, the "Jewish Othello," hears how the most honorable, smartest, and noblest people in the play speak rapturously of Rosa, and only the most bestial, dishonorable, and lowly besmirch her with their unclean mouths.

Entin suggests that Iago's effectiveness stems not just from his evil, but from his almost unanimously accepted semblance of virtue. Michael and Feygele, on the other hand, are unsympathetic from the moment they first appear. Since Yosef knows this as fully as the audience does, his acceptance of their slandering of Rosa does strain credibility.

Kobrin gave up a great deal by excluding a villain on the scale of Iago, but the sacrifice makes some sense within the context of his aesthetics. First of all, Kobrin's dramaturgic style, following in the footsteps of such European contemporaries as Ibsen and Hauptmann, did not easily lend itself to a character like Iago, much of whose evil charm emerged in his many soliloquies--unacceptable devices in realism's world of fourth-wall illusion.

Perhaps more important, Iago was too far gone in his villainy to appeal to a playwright like Kobrin, who was interested in painting lebensbilder [pictures of life] in his dramas. Less drastic villainy, like bullying, philandering, and ingratitude, was more to Kobrin's taste, though the Fraye arbeter shtime critic anticipated that some viewers would feel that Kobrin had already overstepped the bounds of decency: "Many wonder why it was necessary for the author to portray such a terrible Jewish mother as the one in The Blind Musician."⁴³ The critic reminds those who doubt Kobrin's decorum that besides Feygele's and Michael's pettiness being essential to the plot, an artist has the right to depict anyone--even people as revered as Jewish mothers--in whatever light he wishes, as long as he makes his characters true to life. Since such mothers as Feygele, however rare, do exist, concludes the reviewer, Kobrin had license to present her on the stage. "Michael Pomp is also not unknown to us," he adds; "especially here in America, the bluff-land par excellence,

Michael is indeed the true, the proper citizen."⁴⁴

Characterizations such as these led the Fraye arbeter shtime critic to conclude that the play was Kobrin's best to date, though "he has still to write his masterpiece."⁴⁵ The chief fault, complained the critic, was the presence of too many unnecessary characters; he suspected that Kobrin had included some of them only to provide work for the entire People's Theatre company, a troupe whose composition made it necessary for some of the actresses to play male parts. While the critic found Mrs. Vilenski charming as the Sam to Bessie Thomashefsky's Bessie, he found both characters superfluous. At the same time, the critic felt that Boris Thomashefsky excelled in the scenes where Yosef's agony was at its height, and praised him for knowing his part so well at just the second performance--an indication that Yiddish actors at the time were not so polished as a rule.

Most of the productions described so far in this study have been adaptations or translations of a handful of Shakespearean tragedies: Hamlet, King Lear, Romeo and Juliet, Othello. Yiddish adaptors sometimes wrote happy endings to these and other tragedies, but Shakespeare's comedies themselves never gained much of a foothold in the Yiddish repertoire. Except for the many versions of The Merchant of Venice--a play which Yiddish audiences did not regard as a comedy--Thomashefsky's The Pretty American, a musical adaptation of The Taming of the Shrew, was the only American

Yiddish play taken from a Shakespearean comedy.⁴⁶

Students of theatre history would probably not find it surprising for Shakespeare's tragedies to be privileged over the comedies. The list of notable actors who have played Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, and Romeo is long, as is the roster of great actresses who have played Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, Desdemona, and Juliet. But even if these roll calls outweigh the list of notable Shakespearean comedians, the latter has a distinguished tradition of its own. For instance, New Yorkers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could have seen Ada Rehan as Rosalind, E. H. Sothern as Benedick to Julia Marlowe's Beatrice, or the latter couple's Malvolio and Viola.

One can only speculate as to how David Kessler's Falstaff and Keni Liptzin's Mrs. Ford, or Sigmund Mogulesco's Benedick and Bertha Kalish's Beatrice, might have fared with Yiddish audiences. But such ideas, if they tickled the fancies of Yiddish adaptors at the time, never saw the light of day. Shakespeare's comedies were not entirely absent from American Yiddish culture; several of them were summarized in Di yidishe gazeten in 1893-1894, and in Hermalin's 1908 borrowing of the Lambs' Tales From Shakespeare. Nevertheless, the onstage offerings of Shakespeare's comedies never expanded beyond the one adaptation of The Taming of the Shrew.

The Pretty American, with a score by Arnold Perlmutter and Herman Wohl, premiered at the People's Theatre at a

benefit for Bessie Thomashefsky on 13 January 1910. A brief article in Boris Thomashefsky's short-lived weekly theatre newspaper Di idishe bine heralded the play as "the first time that a complete operetta will be performed on the Yiddish stage. Entire dialogues will be presented in song."⁴⁷ One week later, the same paper featured a picture of Bessie Thomashefsky at the center of its front page, accompanying another short notice under the title, "Bessie Thomashefsky in a New, Interesting Role." The article, a thinly veiled ad, promised "the most beautiful costumes and decorations" and a play "that will please everyone, religious and enlightened, men and women, and young and old."⁴⁸

While reviews of The Pretty American were scarce, the Yiddish press did use the play to comment on the status of Shakespearean adaptation into Yiddish. The theatre columnist for the Yidishes tageblat first registered his amusement a couple of weeks after the play's premiere. Noting that the production was selling enough tickets to be installed in a regular Saturday matinee slot at the People's, the writer joked, "Since Thomashefsky adapted this play from Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew, they are considering inviting Shakespeare himself to see if the adaptation is successful."⁴⁹ The columnist offered another wry observation the following week, when he reported,

The People's Theatre is contemplating a new scheme to advertise The Pretty American. Edelstein [the manager] says that since this comic opera has already brought him enough money, and will yet make more, he will install

Shakespeare's statue in the front of the theatre. By his logic, Shakespeare gets all the credit for the great success of the play, which Thomashefsky adapted from Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew? So I ask you, where's the justice? Why not a statue of Thomashefsky?⁵⁰

Given the reporter's previous quip about inviting Shakespeare to the production, his cry for justice seems more sardonic than heartfelt. But however whimsical, these remarks reveal that the play made Yiddish audiences think about the process of adaptation differently from how they perceived earlier Yiddish versions of Shakespeare. The Pretty American was explicitly advertised as both an adaptation of Shakespeare and a Thomashefsky/Perlmutter and Wohl musical; that is, it announced its Elizabethan/Yiddish pedigree in a manner that was only implicit in the advertisements for such works as The Jewish King Lear or The Yeshiva Boy. Advertising the play's co-parentage in this manner raised questions of authorship and ownership: if the "original" idea for the play came from Shakespeare, was Thomashefsky a creator, or just a borrower?

Another commentator used the opportunity of the play's success to take up the issue of aesthetic differentiation: "The Pretty American is a play and The Taming of the Shrew is a play. Both are amusements. The question is, for whom?"⁵¹ The critic claimed that those who appreciated Shakespeare's comedy would get no pleasure from the "fisticuffs" and "clownish grimaces" of Thomashefsky's adaptation, ignoring the fact that Taming itself allows for an extensive display of such activities. The critic then wondered out loud whether

the opposite were true; could one be certain that someone who enjoyed the Thomashefsky musical would be unable to appreciate Shakespeare?

No, that cannot be said. Why not? Because as long as people live, there is hope that they will educate themselves, that they will mature, that their taste will improve, that their spiritual and aesthetic demands will broaden, and so forth. The higher they climb on the ladder of culture, the closer they will come to the moment when The Taming of the Shrew will amuse them more than The Pretty American.⁵²

The columnist insisted on a clarity in the division between aesthetic categories that, in practice, was muddled by the success of Thomashefsky's adaptation. In fact, the whole course of Thomashefsky's Shakespearean career illustrates that such distinctions cannot be drawn so facilely.

Perhaps more than any of his colleagues in the Yiddish theatre, Boris Thomashefsky defies simple categorization. His onstage and backstage colleagues frequently remarked upon the contradictions they felt he embodied, as when Leon Kobrin described the two sides of his friend and colleague:

I would call one 'Thomashefsky-the-good' and the other 'Thomashefsky-the-bad' . . . That is also how he is on the stage. One with that stiff, starched, tophat-tone, without life and soul, the Thomashefsky of cheap shund plays and even cheaper operettas; and the other--with that lively, truly artistic tone, full of soul and fire, which he always revealed in the better plays.⁵³

Celia Adler noticed a similar schism in Thomashefsky's acting, though the split she observed arose from different circumstances:

One could see Thomashefsky's real acting talent better in rehearsals than at the performance. His tones at rehearsals were so natural and human that they could

truly stir the depths of your heart. But as soon as he sensed that he was standing in front of the electric lights, he became something else entirely. You could hear from him the most unnatural tones, bordering at times on the laughable. . . . His natural, sincere Yiddish language would often turn into a shrill, grating daytshmerish.⁵⁴

Paradoxes seemed to fit Thomashefsky like the tights he wore as Alexander, Crown Prince of Jerusalem. The Shakespearean plays he brought to the Yiddish stage exhibit similar artistic tensions, straddling the boundaries that, according to contemporary Yiddish critics, cordoned off "high" and "low" art--or in the Yiddish vernacular, kunst and shund, respectively. While Thomashefsky never seems to have articulated a protest against the assumptions underlying such categories--indeed, his memoirs and other writings on the theatre indicate that he probably accepted most of them--the translations and adaptations of Shakespeare he produced militate against such definitions. The advertisements for the plays often appealed to audiences' loftier sensibilities by modifying nouns like "art" and "poetry" with superlatives like "highest" and "greatest." The same ads, however, often simultaneously promised sensational special effects and flashy costumes. Come for the art, stay for the entertainment, they seemed to say.

Thomashefsky's Shakespearean productions sum up the Thomashefsky "paradox"--not really a paradox at all if one does not insist upon clear boundaries between "high" and "low" art, between "serious" drama and melodrama, and so forth. As

Lawrence Levine reminds us, "because the primary categories of culture have been the products of ideologies which were always subject to modifications and transformations, the perimeters of our cultural divisions have been permeable and shifting rather than fixed and immutable."⁵⁵ Those who wrote about Yiddish theatre had a habit of casually using such terms as "the better drama" vs. "the cheaper plays," kunst vs. shund, as if whatever was placed in one category could not have a trace of the other.

Such divisions, however, became blurred in practice. What Thomashefsky offered to his audiences as "Shakespeare" ran the gamut from essentially faithful if crude translations to adaptations bearing only the slightest thematic resemblance to their source. Ironically, for all his reputation as a shund star, Thomashefsky's Shakespearean repertoire helped to instill in American Yiddish audiences the notion that seeing a Shakespeare play meant seeing drama at its loftiest. By extension, Yiddish plays claiming a Shakespearean lineage, however tenuous, could pretend to aesthetic depth even if their content belied the claim. Shakespeare's reputation was already well established in many other cultures; his ascent to the heights of the Yiddish canon started late, but he scaled them with remarkable speed. Thanks largely to Boris Thomashefsky, Shakespeare had reached a new plateau in his place in the American Yiddish theatre by the first years of the twentieth century.

NOTES

1. Lawrence Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 21.

2. See Chapters 6 and 7.

3. In his article "Shekspir af der yidisher bine un literatur," Zylbercweig noted that Gordin's Di litvishe brider Luria [The Lithuanian Luria Brothers] used the central conflict from Romeo and Juliet. See Hundert yor yidish teater, ed. Charles S. Klinger (London: Jewish Cultural Society, 1962), 29. Gordin's play, which opened at the Thalia Theatre on 15 September 1894, depicts a young couple whose love for each other overcomes their parents' enmity without the lovers having to sacrifice their lives for the general peace. While the play recalls Romeo and Juliet in a number of ways, I have excluded it from my analysis because it was not advertised as a Shakespearean adaptation when it premiered, nor have I found any evidence that critics at the time perceived it as such.

4. Sholem Perlmutter, Yidishe dramaturgn un teater-kompozitors (New York: YKUF, 1952), 178.

5. Zylbercweig, Leksikon, 1:736. American Yiddish plays of this era often took their topics directly from current newspaper headlines. The Spanish-American War spawned, in addition to Zolotarevsky's effort, at least two plays by Moyshe Hurwitz: The Sacrifices of Spain, or Uncle Sam and Miss Cuba (1898), and The Heroes of Santiago, or Patriotism and Love (1899). Hurwitz generally tended to lead the charge in dramatizing current events: for example, The Johnstown Flood (1890), The Heroes of Homestead (1892), and Dreyfus (1899).

6. Bessie Thomashefsky, Mayn lebns geshikhte (New York, 1916), 251.

7. Dos abend-blatt, 30 January 1899. A similar ad first appears in Der teglekher herald on the same day.

8. According to Zylbercweig, Leksikon, 1:736.

9. Zylbercweig, Leksikon, 1:736-37. By giving himself an acting job, the playwright could significantly increase his income. At that time, Yiddish playwrights sold their work for a flat fee (fifty dollars seems to have been a common rate in the 1890s), but if they participated as actors too, would be paid an additional amount (around five dollars) for each night they appeared on stage.

10. Isidore Zolotarevsky, Der yeshive bokher. MS in Thomashefsky Collection, New York Public Library Jewish Division, 22. The Thomashefsky Collection also owns a typescript with the following in English on the title page: "Keshover Cleveland Ohio 11.2. Election Eve 1920;" and an undated manuscript without a title page.
11. Israel Zangwill, Ghetto Comedies (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923), 297.
12. M. Baranov, "Dos eybig-mentshlekhe in Shekspir's dramen," Dos abend-blat, 23 March 1899.
13. Joseph Rumshinsky, Klangen fun mayn lebn (New York: Farlag Biderman, 1944), 811.
14. Sholem Perlmutter, Yidishe dramaturgn un teater-kompozitors (New York: YKUF Farlag, 1952), 347.
15. Perlmutter, 349 and 184.
16. Ibid., 185.
17. According to both Zylbercweig's Leksikon (4:2498) and the Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur (8:402). Perlmutter places Rakov in the United States as early as 1900.
18. Some confusion over the premiere of this play clouds the secondary sources. Perlmutter says that the play had its 1903 debut in Boston, then played elsewhere in New England before coming to New York, where he says it did not open until several years later. Zylbercweig puts the New York debut at 10 April 1907 rather than 10 April 1903, the date announced in the Yiddish newspapers. Zylbercweig and Perlmutter may be correct in stating that the play was first presented in Boston, but if so, it was weeks, not years, before the New York premiere. Incidentally, Der batlen [The idler] has generated its share of confusion as well. Perhaps Perlmutter's remark that this play was inspired by Der yeshive bokher led the Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur to write incorrectly that Der batlen was "better known as Der yeshive bokher" (8:402).
19. Nakhum Rakov, Di shvye baym seyfer-toyre, oder, di yidishe Romeo un Yulia. Unpaginated, undated MS, Vilner Archive, YIVO.
20. Encyclopaedia Judaica (Jerusalem: Macmillan, 1971), 6:651.
21. "Shakespeare in Yiddish," New York Evening Post, 3 June 1903.
22. John Corbin, "Topics of the Drama," New York Times, 26 April 1903.
23. Joshua Kohn, The Synagogue in Jewish Life (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1973), 193.

24. "Shakespeare in Yiddish," New York Evening Post, 3 June 1903.
25. Avrom Goldfadn, Oysgeklibene shriftn, ed. Shmuel Rozhanski (Buenos Aires: Literary Society of YIVO in Argentina, 1963), 51.
26. Corbin, "Topics of the Drama."
27. Rakov does not provide the text for Sheyndele's song, but merely the stage direction, "She sings from the Song of Songs." However, the "literal translation" the New York Evening Post reporter claims to provide is far more chaste:
 My beloved one spake and said unto me,
 Rise up, my love, my fair one, come away,
 For, lo! the winter is past and rain is over and gone;
 The flowers appear on the earth, the time of the singing bird
 is come.
 Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth,
 Where thou feedest, where thou makest the flock to rest at
 noon;
 For why should I be as one that turneth aside from the flocks
 of my companions?
28. Maurice Lamm, The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 231.
29. Ninety years later, this line conjures up the guilt trip that serves as the punchline to so many Jewish mother jokes, but beside the fact that the context for the remark is quite somber, such jokes had not yet come into fashion at the time, according to William Novaks and Moshe Waldoks, editors of The Big Book of Jewish Humor (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 268: "Jokes about the Jewish mother--the biggest cliché in contemporary Jewish humor--are a relatively recent phenomenon. Traditional Jewish humor had no such jokes . . . it was not until the mass arrival of Jewish immigrants to America that the Jewish mother was transformed into an object of humor--and even then, only after several decades."
30. Zylbercweig, Leksikon, 4:2962.
31. Leon Kobrin, Erinerungen fun a idishn dramaturg (New York: Committee for Kobrin's Writings, 1925), 1:13-20.
32. Kobrin, Erinerungen, 1:83-89; Joel Entin, "Leon Kobrin der dramaturg," in Leon Kobrin, Dramatishe shriftn (New York: Leon Kobrin Book Committee, 1952), xv-xviii.
33. Entin, "Leon Kobrin der dramaturg," xix-xx.
34. Korolenko's novel appeared in Der emes starting with the first issue on 3 May 1895 and running until 16 August of the same year. The same translation was reprinted in the Forverts from 11 April to 10 May 1903.

35. Shmuel Niger, Dertseylers un romanistn (New York: Central Yiddish Culture Organization, 1946), 218.

36. Leon Kobrin, Der blinder muzikant, oder der yidisher Oteló. The YIVO Institute has a manuscript copy, "specially written for Boris Thomashefsky," in its Perlmutter Collection. The Jewish Division of the New York Public Library has two copies of the play in the Thomashefsky Collection: an unpaginated manuscript (17) and a typescript (7). The manuscript's title page reads, "Der blinder muzikant oder der yidisher Oteló! Family drama in 4 acts by Leon Kobrin, written especially for Mr. Boris Thomashefsky. Staged by D. Groits NY November 9--1904 People's Theatre." The typescript's provenance is not as clear; pencilled on title page is "11/2/28 Harry Sherman Hollywood Calif." I will base my analysis on the two manuscript versions (the YIVO manuscript being essentially a slightly longer version of the NYPL manuscript) unless I note otherwise.

37. Leo Rosten, The Joys of Yinglish (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989), 77-78.

38. See Harry Carpenter, Boxing: A Pictorial History (Glasgow and London: Collins, 1975), 28-32; and Claude Droussent, L'Encyclopedie de la Boxe (Editions Ramsay, 1990), 35-46. In the Thomashefsky Collection manuscript, "Fitz" is crossed out and "Willard" pencilled in. Jesse Willard was most famous for stripping the world heavyweight title from Jack Johnson in a controversial fight on April 5, 1915. The name change in the script probably indicates that Fitzsimmons, who was prominent when Der blinder muzikant premiered, was referred to in the initial production, but the reference was changed to Willard when the same script was used in a revival years later. In the typescript, Bessie initially refers to Johnson, whose name is crossed out and replaced by [Jack] Dempsey.

39. Ronald Sanders, Shores of Refuge (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 183.

40. The YIVO manuscript contains a scene, cut from the Thomashefsky Collection scripts, that starts with a soliloquy of several pages in which Yoysef concludes that Rosa loved not him, but the idea of his future success. Maykele unwittingly provokes Yosef much more than in the Thomashefsky Collection scripts by rambling on about how he has done nothing to disabuse his friends of their misconception that he is married to Rosa.

41. D. M., "Der blinder muzikant," Di fraye arbeter shtime, 14 November 1903.

42. Entin later recalled that Kobrin took the review personally, a reaction that brought a temporary halt to their friendship. See "Leon Kobrin der dramaturg," xxv.

43. "Der blinder muzikant," Di fraye arbeter shtime, 21 November 1903.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. The title of this play presents a historical puzzle, for the Thomashefsky Collection contains a manuscript by the same name, "adapted from the German by Leon Kobrin." This script is clearly not the Sheyne amerikanerin first produced by Thomashefsky in January 1910. Aside from the play's not being attributed to Kobrin in advertisements and reviews and the Kobrin MS having no apparent connection to The Taming of the Shrew--inconclusive evidence, as earlier discussions in this chapter show--Kobrin's script is not a musical, and its characters' names have nothing in common with the names in the director's score of Thomashefsky's play (in the Perlmutter Collection, YIVO). All of these factors combined indicate that the Kobrin script was not the same as the Thomashefsky musical; they do not, however, establish what it was. Standard sources on Kobrin mention no such play. If it ever was produced, it must have been under another name.

47. "A yidishe operete fun Shekspir's a komedy," Di idishe bine, 31 December 1909.

48. "Bessie Thomashefsky in a nayer interesanter role," Di idishe bine, 7 January 1910.

49. Yisroyl der Yenki [Israel Friedman], "Vos tut zikh in teater?" Dos yidishes tageblat, 28 January 1910.

50. Yisroyl der Yenki, "Vos tut zikh in teater?" Dos yidishes tageblat, 4 February 1910.

51. E. Wolf, "Drame un amyuzment," Der amerikaner, 4 March 1910.

52. Ibid.

53. Kobrin, Erinerungen, 2:125-27.

54. Celia Adler, Tsili Adler dertseylt (New York: Celia Adler Foundation and Book Committee, 1959), 1:311.

55. Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow, 8.

CHAPTER 5

IN BERNHARDT'S FOOTSTEPS: BERTHA KALISH'S HAMLET

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, as Marvin Carlson has written, "the age of the international star had come."¹ During this era, audiences in England and the United States frequently enjoyed touring productions featuring such continental stars as Bogumil Dawison and Ernst Von Possart from Germany, Sarah Bernhardt and Charles Fechter from France, and Adelaide Ristori, Tommaso Salvini, Ernesto Rossi, and Eleonora Duse from Italy. Shakespeare's plays figured prominently in these actors' touring repertoires and served as a universal theatrical language, for the tongue in which the classics were performed was often secondary to the skill with which they were presented. Whereas assessing the relative merits of Kalish's acting versus that of an Edwin Booth (or, for that matter, a Thomashefsky) might be like comparing apples and oranges, comparing two actors' Hamlets would be more manageable, an assessment of the relative merits of two types of apple.

Bertha Kalish (1872-1939) made her debut as Hamlet in 1901, a rich period of cultural and linguistic exchange in the theatre. She had already risen to theatrical prominence in three languages before her Broadway debut in 1905, after which she quickly became a star on the English-language stage as well. Her Yiddish Hamlet was a milestone in her career; it helped her make the transition from hyphenated American

actress whose language blatantly announced her ethnicity to American actress whose European accent, like those of her contemporaries Helena Modjeska and Alla Nazimova, distinguished her as exotic without preventing her from being appreciated and applauded by the English-speaking public. Kalish also helped inaugurate a new phase in the recognition of the Yiddish theatre by non-Yiddish-speaking critics, who felt that her production of Hamlet reached a higher level of artistic achievement than they were accustomed to seeing in the Yiddish theatre.

Bertha Kalish's theatrical career, like those of most American Yiddish actors of her generation, began in Europe. She was born in 1872 in the Austro-Hungarian city of Lemberg (now Lvov, Ukraine). Her working-class parents sought to provide her with an education. They sent her to music school as a girl, and she later studied at the Lemberg Conservatory. At the age of thirteen, she was hired to sing in the chorus of La Traviata in a Polish theatre. After performing in the chorus of several other productions, she accepted the offer of a fellow actor, Max Gimpel, to join his new Yiddish theatre in Lemberg. When the company's leading lady (who would later play Ophelia to Kalish's Hamlet) left for America, Kalish became the troupe's primadonna, starring in such plays as Avrom Goldfadn's operetta Shulamis. Gimpel's Theatre would become one of the world's most prominent Yiddish theatres, but it did not take Kalish long to be recognized by an even more

powerful figure. When Goldfaden himself saw her perform at Gimpel's Theatre, he so admired the beauty of both her person and her voice that he hired her to join his company in Romania.

Much of her subsequent career followed a similar pattern: a series of increasingly lucrative and prominent offers that led her from Bucharest to the Bowery, from the Bowery to Broadway. After performing in various cities in Hungary, Romania, and Galicia from the late 1880s until 1896, she was persuaded by the management of the Thalia Theatre in New York to join the company for the salary of thirty-five dollars per week. She quickly became as popular with New York audiences as she had been in Europe, and her salary jumped to 150 dollars per week for her second season in New York.²

By the early 1900s, Bertha Kalish was more than just another Yiddish star: she made such a tremendous impact in several of the roles she created that no other actress dared touch them. Most prominent in her repertoire were leading roles in three of Jacob Gordin's most popular plays: Etenyu in God, Man, and Devil (1901); Sophia Fingerhut in Sappho (1901), and Ettie in The Kreutzer Sonata (1902). Gordin wrote the latter two plays specifically for Bertha Kalish; when she crossed over to the English-language stage, where she would meet with greater success than any other Yiddish actor of her generation, the plays dropped out of the Yiddish performance repertoire.³ Kalish also appeared in more conventional

Yiddish performances of Shakespeare before playing Hamlet, having played Desdemona and Juliet on the Bowery in the late 1890s.

While, in Jill Edmonds' words, "The twentieth century has tended again to see female Hamlets as experimental,"⁴ they were fairly commonplace in the decades leading up to Bertha Kalish's debut in the role. Sarah Siddons was probably the first woman to play Hamlet, around 1775, though never in a London theatre;⁵ those who followed her included fellow Englishwoman Alice Marriott in the 1860s, and American star Charlotte Cushman beginning in the 1850s.

As the tradition of female Hamlets grew, it also grew less remarkable. Most of the critics who attended Kalish's Hamlet did not dwell on the issue of an actress playing a man, though it did bother A. H. Fromenson:

No woman, not even Bernhardt, much less Kalisch, can enter into all the various conflicting, contradicting, soul-rocking emotions that racked the tortured spirit of the unfortunate Prince of Denmark. It is essentially a man's part. . . . It is, therefore, not to be wondered at that Miss Kalisch could not attain the heights she sought to reach.⁶

Other critics, however, touched on the gender issue only in passing if at all, one finding Kalish's Hamlet "handsome and manly,"⁷ another seeing her as "a pleasing, though plainly a feminine, Hamlet."⁸ On the whole, the critics seem to have found it to be hardly more noteworthy than the phenomenon of an American playing a Dane.

Although Hamlet had been played by numerous other

actresses before Bernhardt, Kalish undoubtedly had the French star specifically in mind as she prepared for the role. Even if the names Siddons and Cushman meant something to Kalish, they would probably not have been familiar to her audience, and would therefore be unlikely to bring extra dollars into the box office.

Sarah Bernhardt, on the other hand, was a contemporary sensation; furthermore, plays from her repertoire had recently been produced in Yiddish at the Thalia Theatre. Kalish herself starred in Moyshe Zeifert's translation of Victorien Sardou's Fédora (1882); the play, billed in the Yiddish press as "the best work in Sarah Bernhardt's repertoire," premiered on 11 November 1898.⁹ Just two months later at the same theatre, Keni Liptzin starred in Gordin's translation of Octave Mirbeau's Les Mauvais Bergers (1897), which opened on 6 January 1899. While the lavish spectacle of Sardou's play and the socialist orientation of Mirbeau's had plenty of counterparts in the Yiddish repertoire, neither French playwright was otherwise prominent on Yiddish stages.

Shakespeare, of course, was another story, and once Bernhardt took on the role of Hamlet in Paris in 1899, it seems natural for Kalish to have taken advantage of this intersection of a classical icon with a contemporary one. Indeed, she fairly leapt at the role after Bernhardt first brought her Hamlet to New York, where it opened at the Garden Theatre on 25 December 1900. Just over a month later, Kalish

followed with a Yiddish version.

While Kalish performed her Hamlet in a Yiddish theatre on New York's Lower East Side, she clearly sought to take advantage of the publicity generated by both Sarah Bernhardt's and Boris Thomashefsky's recent performances of the role in order to attract as broad an audience as possible. Thomashefsky had gained notoriety for his appearances in both translated and Judaized versions of the play.¹⁰ Bernhardt's Hamlet evoked equally divergent opinions from audiences and critics in both Europe and America. As her biographer Cornelia Otis Skinner writes, "Opinions regarding Bernhardt's own performance were varied and heated. Many found it superb. Others couldn't bear it."¹¹ Some were clearly put off by her sex and her age. Critics agreed that she did not even try to conceal her femininity; Max Beerbohm quipped that her Hamlet was "très grand dame."¹² She was also much older than the role as written, though at fifty-four she was far from the oldest to have played the part, and the school of realism was not yet so firmly entrenched as to bar older actors from the part.

Perhaps more important than such physical attributes was Bernhardt's insistence on embellishing the role with a great deal of stage business: she knocked Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's heads together; kicked Polonius in the shins and caught a fly on his nose; used Ophelia's hair as a screen through which she viewed The Mousetrap; kneeled before the

ghost; and died standing up.¹³ Theatre historian Robert Speaight notes that her interpretation had its admirers:

. . . since Mounet[-Sully] saw the performance ten times and Maurice Baring described it as "the ultimate triumph of intelligence," her impertinent challenge cannot be written off as a bad joke. . . . In the summer of 1899 she brought the production to London. The Times was respectful, and Clement Scott, in The Daily Telegraph, laid at her feet such laurels as he had not already laid at the feet of Irving.¹⁴

Often, however, praise for Bernhardt's performance was drowned out by a chorus of disapproval, William Winter harshly pronouncing the performance "well calculated to commend itself to persons interested in the study of freaks."¹⁵ The conflicting reactions to both Thomashefsky's and Bernhardt's interpretations opened a middle road for Kalish, who emulated some of their production choices while avoiding others, thus capitalizing on the fame of her colleagues' productions while forging her own interpretation of the role.

Reviewers were quick to note parallels and contrasts to the Hamlets of both Bernhardt and Thomashefsky. Kalish acquitted herself well, though the Commercial Advertiser critic observed,

It would perhaps have been as well if Mrs. Kalisch had never seen Bernhardt. Her conception of the Dane is wholly different from the Frenchwoman's, and so her direct copying of much of Bernhardt's melodramatic business with Polonius and at the play is out of place. Still, it is a worthy effort and a success, and well deserves repetition from time to time, especially as it is so much better than the other Bowery Hamlets and than many more famous ones.¹⁶

Alan Dale noted that Kalish modeled her Hamlet's costume after Bernhardt except for the blond wig (an innovation that Charles

Fechter had introduced), which she exchanged for a long dark one. Dale praised Kalish's interpretation in general, finding that it occasionally "suggested Sarah at her best. It rarely recalled Sarah's Hamlet at her worst."¹⁷

While the critics noticed some clear imitations of Bernhardt in both costume and manner, they seemed to heave a collective sigh of relief at the distance between Kalish's and Thomashefsky's Hamlets. A. H. Fromenson was particularly acerbic as he recalled Kalish's Yiddish forebears in the role:

We have had 'Hamlet' on the Jewish stage before, that is, a play that was called 'Hamlet,' but which, as rendered, must have made the bones of the Bard of Avon rattle in anguish. Hamlet has been rendered in Yiddish as a fat, hoarse butcher with dyspepsia, as a conceited ass more concerned about his appearance in tights than with the great wrong that he had been sworn to right, and as a man with a chip on his shoulder looking for trouble and finding it.¹⁸

The critic from the Commercial Advertiser rendered a similar but less caustic verdict:

The general adequacy of the performance showed that Hamlet is something of a tradition on the Bowery. Thomasheusky, at the People's, and Kessler, at the Thalia, have both tried their hands in versions of the melancholy Dane. The production of the former, who is known on the Bowery as the Yiddish Hamlet, is much inferior to the present production at the Thalia. Throughout, the actors give a performance dignified, serious and, as a whole, quite faithful to our English conception of what the play ought to be.¹⁹

Kalish's Hamlet thus followed in the Yiddish tradition, but did she perform Hamlet in Yiddish? The critic from the New York Dramatic Mirror noted approvingly, "The German version of the play that was used is, in the main, true to the original."²⁰ Alan Dale expanded on the compliment, claiming

that the production

escaped the Yiddish jargon. Mme. Kalisch, the pet of the Yiddish community, felt that 'the classics' called for German just as pure as they could get it. Yiddish--which down in the Bowery is looked upon as the 'jargon of the sweat shops'--was thought to be incompatible with Shakespeare. Besides, pure German is educational. The consequence was that the Yiddish audience got its 'Hamlet' in German, without the Polish-Hebrew chowder to which the Thalia audiences are accustomed.²¹

Ironically, Dale himself provides the strongest evidence that the production was given in anything but "pure German," for the cast of characters, sans Guildenstern and Fortinbras, printed at the top of his review exactly matches that of B. Vilenski's Yiddish translation of the play. Other cuts in the text also match the critics' descriptions of the production. Vilenski rendered Hamlet into a linguistic "chowder" of another sort--daytshmerish--which often comes close enough to German to be able to deceive the less-than-fluent listener. For instance, his script opens with the following exchange:

Bernardo: Halt, ver do?

Horatio: Fraynd dizes badens.

Bernardo: Willkommen fraynd Martselus!

Horatio: Nun Martselus, habt ir hayte vider den gayst gezehen?²²

The language of the translation does not belong entirely to either German or Yiddish, but this passage, at least, comes far closer to the former than to the latter.

The critics may have mistaken daytshmerish for High German, but they did not forget that the actors were Jewish. Alan Dale seemed particularly tickled by the experience of hearing an English classic performed by Yiddish actors. His

review included a reproduction of a page of the program, followed by the caption (which contradicts his aforementioned observation about the language of the production), "Curious spelling of the names of the famous characters in Shakespeare's play. In Yiddish Ophelia is 'Affolio,' and other names are similarly treated without fear or favor." Later in his review, Dale reminded his readers of the Jewishness of the actors:

The names of the players themselves read like a directory of the East Side. Moskowitz was Claudius, and Mrs. Nadolsky was Gertrude. The Ghost fell to the lot of Mr. Goldstein, and Ophelia was interpreted by Mrs. Tanzman. There was a Marcus, and a Feinstein, and a Friedman and a Tornberg.²³

Dale does not elaborate on this "directory," but the condescension drips from his remarks, as if he had proclaimed, How quaint for these denizens of the Jewish ghetto to take on one of the greatest English masterpieces! Perhaps he would have been more comfortable if the actors had changed their names to less conspicuously ethnic ones, just as he chose an Anglo-Saxon nom de plume rather than his legal name, Alfred J. Cohen.²⁴

The critic from the New York Dramatic Mirror was both more direct and more sensitive than Dale regarding the meeting of cultures he observed in the production, concluding, "There were crudities in the performance, it is true, but they were crudities born not of negligence but of a temperament alien to that of the characters portrayed. The Shylock of the Gentile actor may seem no less crude to the Jew."²⁵ Even--one might

say especially--the critics in the Yiddish press often denigrated the aesthetic sensibilities of Yiddish actors and audiences. The Mirror critic, on the other hand, attempted to be objective about the cultural assumptions at work in a foreign culture rather than emphasizing the exoticism of that community.

The pivotal role Bertha Kalish's Hamlet played in attracting more widespread attention both for her and for the New York Yiddish theatre calls for a close examination of how she, her translator, and her fellow actors interpreted the play. The combination of an extant text and descriptions by contemporary critics allows for a fairly detailed reconstruction of Kalish's initial production of Hamlet, as well as some indication of changes she made in subsequent productions.

Vilenski's text apparently²⁶ begins with the Danish court scene, an arrangement that places all the ghost scenes together after Laertes takes leave of his father and sister. As Mikhl Goldberg had done in his translation for Thomashefsky, Vilenski extensively cuts Polonius' famous verbosity; for example, he completely eliminates the "To thine own self be true" speech, and truncates the exhortation to Ophelia at the end of the scene. Somehow, though, Samuel Tornberg still managed to convey the humor of the role; Alan Dale found the character "to be a very humorous individual, just as in the Sarah version. He wore a sort of velvet

gaberdine, rich and kosher, and seemed to enjoy his life extremely."²⁷

Besides making Hamlet a proportionately larger role, the cuts in Polonius' speeches move the action more quickly to Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost. The production emphasized the elder Hamlet's martial background not only by dressing him in a military costume, but also by having him march across the stage each time he appeared--a movement that looked to Dale like a "cake-walk gait."²⁸ To Hamlet, however, the Ghost's bearing was anything but an invitation to dance. Upon first seeing his dead father, Hamlet falls back into Horatio's arms and loses his hat--precisely the same reaction as that of Thomashefsky's Hamlet. The script does not require the audience to experience all of its awe vicariously through the actors, however. The Ghost's command to "Swear!" is accompanied by flashes of thunder and lightning. Dale watched the scene "with many thrills and keen enjoyment,"²⁹ while the Dramatic Mirror added that Goldstein³⁰ "gave a praiseworthy performance as the Ghost."³¹ The Commercial Advertiser, however, was not as sanguine about the performance, tersely concluding, "The ghost is bad."³²

Act I ends with Hamlet declaring, with upraised sword (again like Thomashefsky's Hamlet) his eagerness to avenge his father's murder: "Hear me. Your avenger lives, and he will fight for you until his last breath. So help me God." (23) Like Mikhail Goldberg, Vilenski cuts the lines from Shakespeare

that show Hamlet's reluctance: "The time is out of joint--O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!" [I.v.188-89] The reviewers' comments suggest that Bertha Kalish may have given the Yiddish lines a more subdued reading than Thomashefsky did, but the text itself presented a Hamlet far more eager to avenge his father's death than is Shakespeare's Hamlet at the same point in the play.

A less ambivalent Hamlet makes for a less complicated tragedy. Such an interpretation is consistent with other simplifications in the text Kalish used; Vilenski's textual changes led one critic to conclude,

The most significant things, psychologically, in the alterations of the text, are those which point out what elements of Shakespeare would be unintelligible to the average Yiddish mind and education. . . . Metaphor they either abandon or simplify. For instance, where the ghost in the original simply tells Hamlet that the serpent that stung his life now wears his crown, in this version the simile [sic] is fully explained.³³

Such adjustments follow in the tradition of many earlier Yiddish translations, which tended both to simplify the plays' narratives and to lessen the character flaws of such heroes as Hamlet, Romeo, and Coriolanus.

As Act II opens, Vilenski simplifies the action by eliminating several secondary characters: Reynaldo, Voltemand, and Guildenstern. These cuts condense exposition and get Kalish back onstage as quickly as possible, this time to begin demonstrating her ability to portray either real or feigned insanity. The critics read her interpretation as the latter, Dale viewing her Hamlet as "a very sane and lucid gentleman of

a somewhat rollicking turn of mind,"³⁴ the Dramatic Mirror seeing it as "a romantic Hamlet--not an insane Hamlet, nor a philosophical Hamlet."³⁵ The adjective "rollicking" matches Vilenski's stage directions for Hamlet throughout the scene. After Hamlet delivers his first line to Polonius, he spins around, an action he repeats a few lines later. As if this were not disconcerting enough, he also stares at Polonius when the latter asks, "Do you know me, Prince?" and fans through the pages of his book three times as he announces that he is reading "Words. Words. Words."

Vilenski has censored the double entendres in this scene and in subsequent ones; as in Goldberg's translation, Hamlet does not speak to Ophelia of "country matters." Vilenski also cuts the Players' roles significantly, leaving them with so little to say that Hamlet's advice on acting seems in this case like much ado about nothing. Act II closes with Hamlet's soliloquy, predictably unexpurgated, which ends with the exclamation, "At the play! At the play!" (40)--again, a more exuberant outburst than Shakespeare's straightforward, "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King." [II.ii.604-5] After the last line, Hamlet freezes in a pose (in Yiddish, pozitsyon) between the curtains, a common device in the nineteenth century for ending acts and plays.

Typical as it was to create a tableau vivant as the sole focus at any given moment, it was a far different choice to present such an image while some other, more central, activity

was taking place. Kalish's production did just that during the most famous speech in dramatic literature. Ophelia kneels in prayer just before Hamlet enters for the "To be or not to be" soliloquy and remains in that position throughout his musings over whether he should his quietus make. Whatever one thinks of the merits or shortcomings of such a production choice, keeping Ophelia onstage at that moment was an artistically generous move for a star to make at a time when most Yiddish actors of Kalish's stature did all they could to minimize the other actors' presence as a way of enhancing their own.

Kalish played a Hamlet increasingly agitated as the following scene with Ophelia progressed, letting out a "terrible scream" (48) before remarking, "Let the doors be shut upon him," and twice starting to exit in mid-sentence before returning. A. H. Fromenson regarded the scene as the zenith of Kalish's performance:

Only once did Miss Kalisch reach the greatest height. She had one truly great scene, and for this alone the production was worthwhile. Hamlet's scene with Ophelia, where the prince orders his sweetheart to 'go to a cloister and become a nun,' was sublime, and not even the divine Sarah could have rendered it better.³⁶

The critics were not so enthusiastic about either of the actresses who played Ophelia. Mrs. Tantsman, Kalish's former colleague at Gimpel's Theatre in Lemberg, originated the role in Vilenski's translation; the Dramatic Mirror deemed her "not in her best element as Ophelia."³⁷ Dale sarcastically elaborated:

The most gorgeous feature of the whole performance was Ophelia, or Affolio. She was hugely fat and lusty. She was richly attired in Nottingham lace curtains, cut low in the neck, and her hair was tied back in Grand street style. . . . If poor Affolio was not a very cuddlesome sort of a gyurl, this Hamlet at least made the best of her. It is hard for even a feminine Hamlet to wax poetic over an Ophelia that looks like one of the Russell brothers.³⁸

Sabina Weinblatt eventually replaced Mrs. Tantsman, but fared little better with the critics, the Commercial Advertiser remarking, "Miss Weinblatt, who replaced the former Ophelia, did not give her charm. Miss Weinblatt is an excellent soubrette, but the qualities which make her in most of her Yiddish parts quite mar her Ophelia."³⁹

The next stage direction giving a clue to Hamlet's state of mind comes at the conclusion of the Mousetrap scene; after Claudius has the play stopped, Hamlet approaches him and "stares straight at him." (58) Considering the critics' agreement that Kalish played Hamlet as anything but insane, the movement suggests a Hamlet confidently sizing up his uncle and unafraid to show Claudius that Hamlet knows all about the true circumstances of the elder Hamlet's death. Morris Moskowitz as Claudius was singled out for praise, Fromenson finding in his acting

a polish and reserve that indicates a very intelligent mind, and if he does not allow himself to be dragged down by the degrading influences at work on the Yiddish stage, there is a brilliant future in store for him. He played with a quiet dignity that made his thankless role stand out brilliantly.⁴⁰

Staring at Claudius can serve as a prelude to a more extensive chastisement of Gertrude. The Commercial Advertiser

described the scene in Gertrude's chamber as follows: "In the closet scene she is particularly good when she upbraids Gertrude, but makes a very bad end by drawing her sword on her, and then repenting and crying 'Mother, mother!' after the Wilson Barrett manner."⁴¹ According to critic William Winter, "In Wilson Barrett's performance of Hamlet the manifestation of filial love was conspicuous for fervency and zeal. But filial love is not the sovereign charm of Hamlet nor is it the dominant impulse of his character."⁴²

While the staging and wording at the end of the scene directly recalls Thomashefsky, Kalish apparently removed this stage business for a later production. In the manuscript of the Vilenski translation, the ending described above has been crossed out and a new one, much closer to Shakespeare's, inserted in different handwriting. The new ending eliminates Hamlet's threat with his sword, and ends the act with Hamlet saying, "Good night, mother, good night. Come sir, I must make an end of you." (73) Kalish clearly used the more sentimental ending in January of 1901, but apparently reverted to Shakespeare's at some later point in the translation's stage life. Since Bertha Kalish was so highly praised for depicting a subtler Hamlet than Thomashefsky's most of the time, the resemblances between the Vilenski and Goldberg translations at such moments may indicate the concessions Kalish was willing to make to audiences weaned on Shakespearean performances that were presented more broadly

than she would have liked. Once she established a Hamlet with her personal stamp, she seems to have gained the confidence to alter the text to suit her approach more appropriately.

Vilenski follows the closet scene with an exchange in which Gertrude gets a chance to begin redeeming herself. Horatio reads her a letter from Hamlet describing his escape from Claudius' trap, which prompts her to show both her intense love for her son and her growing disgust with Claudius.⁴³ In spite of the harsh scolding Hamlet gave her a few scenes earlier, Gertrude clearly has not appreciated her husband's villainy until now. As she learns the details of the plot against Hamlet, she exclaims, "Woe! My husband the king!" and wrings her hands with increasing intensity as the letter elaborates on the details. When Horatio reads about Hamlet's escape, Gertrude looks heavenward and sighs, "God be praised for that."

Act IV ends with a startling image, reminiscent of the fascination of Victorian painters like John Everett Millais with pictorial representations of the drowned Ophelia. When Gertrude describes Ophelia's drowning to Laertes, he remarks, "Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia, / And therefore I forbid my tears." [IV.vii.185-86] The Vilenski production has Ophelia's body brought onstage by this point, thus turning Laertes' apostrophe into a direct address to his sister's corpse. This addition, typical as it was of the American Yiddish theatre of its time, also managed to out-Shakespeare

Shakespeare. Showing the drowned Ophelia makes literal a figurative rhetorical passage while heightening both the sentimentality and the visual spectacle of the moment. It also resembles any number of addresses to deceased or seemingly deceased Shakespearean characters--Lady Anne to Edward VI, Lear to Cordelia, and Romeo to Juliet, to name but a few.

Not surprisingly after the presentation of Ophelia's drowned corpse, the production makes an impressive spectacle of her funeral. Four pallbearers carry her body on a bier bedecked with flowers; they are accompanied by two clergymen, four pages, courtiers, ladies carrying flowers, and Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes. After Laertes and Hamlet fight and are separated, Hamlet leaves, a clock chimes, and Ophelia is buried. While Laertes suppressed his tears at the end of Act IV, Vilenski proves unable to resist at least one chance to exploit the situation's sentimental potential, for the scene ends with Laertes crying, "Ophelia, my dear sister, she is dead." (96)

The translator also capitalizes on the opportunity to add an extra measure of sentimentality to the duel. Apparently unsatisfied with the opportunity Shakespeare provided in the closet scene for Gertrude to atone for past misdeeds, Vilenski gives her extra dialogue marked by the sort of protectiveness that would soon become the clarion call of the stereotypical American Jewish mother. Gertrude interrupts Hamlet's

preparations for the duel by pleading, "No, no, my son, do not do it, I beg of you. My heart trembles at the thought of it."

(97) In spite of Hamlet's and Claudius' repeated attempts to placate her, she continues to call for the duel to be canceled, thus reinforcing the ominousness of the finale as it helps reinstate Gertrude's humanity.

Vilenski keeps the rest of the action in the graveyard (again as Goldberg had done for Thomashefsky) to the chagrin of one critic. While praising the text's overall faithfulness to the original, the Dramatic Mirror felt that this choice made "the final tragedy come abruptly. This destroys the power of the closing incidents of the story and sadly weakens the character of Hamlet."⁴⁴

The ending came even more abruptly by omitting Fortinbras entirely and giving the last lines to the dying Hamlet, who tells Horatio, "Now you are freed of your oath. Tell everything that you have seen on this terrible night." (114) As he dies, the audience hears a flourish of trumpets, and the sounds of people weeping offstage. As with the end of Act III, Kalish apparently amended this ending for a subsequent production, reinstating Fortinbras. He does little, however, except ask what happened, and he still does not get to utter the last line, which is now Horatio's "Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!" [V.ii.359-60]

Alan Dale ultimately managed to contain his sarcasm in

order to register an approving assessment of the production:

Shakespeare would probably have recognized his 'Hamlet.' I have seen very many worse performances, with highly advertised actors in the cast. All these Yiddish favorites were sublimely in earnest. There were no airs. There were no frills. . . . But it was all conscientious and well directed. . . . There were no poses, no struggles for elusive effect. She got down to the solid bed rock of the idea and hammered at it.⁴⁵

Her large audience, according to the Dramatic Mirror, was even more enthusiastic:

The old playhouse . . . was fairly packed from orchestra rail to topmost tier. The spectators belonged to every class and type of the Hebrew race. That she triumphed, in the opinion of her admirers, was proved by the thunderous applause that brought her again and again before the curtain at the conclusion of each act."⁴⁶

Kalish's Hamlet was no mere drawing-room experiment. It was popular theatre--popular enough to remain in her repertoire as long as she remained in the Yiddish theatre.

Bertha Kalish herself gave a similarly positive verdict of the production three years later, when she told Hutchins Hapgood, "I think Hamlet was my greatest artistic success."⁴⁷ She also told him of her plans to star in Cymbeline and As You Like It as well. This would have added two new works to the Yiddish Shakespearean repertoire, but she never appeared in those plays in any language.

However, the publicity that Hamlet helped bring her led to further attention from the English-language press and theatre, so that it was not unreasonable to tell a journalist in 1905 that her "devoutest wish" was "to emerge as an artiste of full stature, and make my appeal to the great Christian

world."⁴⁸ That wish soon came true. The same year, she made her English-language debut in the title role of Sardou's Fédora. In 1906, she starred in American playwright Langdon Mitchell's adaptation of Gordin's Kreutzer Sonata. That play proved just as successful for her in English as it had in Yiddish, and later became her first vehicle under the management of Lee and J. J. Shubert, an association that lasted from 1911 to the mid-twenties.

The combination of Bertha Kalish's talent, diligence, and beauty and the Shuberts' aggressive management helped ensure her continued prosperity on English-speaking stages, making her the only Yiddish actor of her generation to achieve a sustained career as a Broadway star. A key moment in her rise to stardom was her Hamlet, which brought several English-language critics to the so-called "Jewish ghetto." Pivotal as her Hamlet was in gaining her broader recognition, it also led to a larger phenomenon: greater exposure for Yiddish performances of Shakespeare, and even occasional tours to English-language theatres. Two Yiddish actors--Jacob Adler and Rudolf Schildkraut--would grab the spotlight in this arena in the next decade, both of them playing Shylock, the most problematic of all Shakespearean roles for Jewish actors and audiences.

NOTES

1. Marvin Carlson, The Italian Shakespearians (Washington, D. C.: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1985), 22.
2. These figures are provided by Zylbercweig, Leksikon fun yidishn teater, 4:2426.
3. The Kreutzer Sonata, Gordin's loose adaptation of Tolstoy's story, was also adopted by the English-language American stage, though Bertha Kalish was not the first to star in the English version. Blanche Walsh originated the role of Miriam (the English version's equivalent of Ettie) in an adaptation by Langdon Mitchell in 1906.
4. Jill Edmonds, "Princess Hamlet," in The New Woman and Her Sisters, ed. Vivien Gardner and Susan Rutherford (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 60.
5. The date is according to Bernard Grebanier, Then Came Each Actor (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1975), 254. Edmonds dates Sarah Siddons' debut as Hamlet at 1776; see "Princess Hamlet," 59.
6. A. H. Fromenson, "Kalish as Hamlet." Undated clipping from unidentified newspaper in Scrapbook, Bertha Kalich Papers, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center.
7. Commercial Advertiser, 23 February 1901.
8. New York Dramatic Mirror, 9 February 1901.
9. Dosabend blat, 7 November 1898. Actually, the Yiddish translation was billed as Féodora, perhaps an unintentional conflation of two similarly titled Sardou plays, Fédora and Théodora, both of which became Bernhardt vehicles. Although Kalish was not mentioned in the initial advertisements, she later told a New York Times reporter that she had played the role (see "Yiddish Duse, About to Make Her Debut on the English Stage in 'Fedora,' Discusses Her Art and Her Ambitions," The New York Times, 14 May 1905, III, 5).
10. See Chapters 3 and 4.
11. Cornelia Otis Skinner, Madame Sarah (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 261.
12. Max Beerbohm, "Hamlet, Princess of Denmark," reprinted in Beerbohm, Around Theatres (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953), 36.
13. These details are provided by William Winter, Shakespeare on the Stage (1911; reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom, 1969), 1:433-35.

14. Robert Speaight, Shakespeare on the Stage (London, 1972), 96.
15. Winter, 1:432.
16. "The Theatres," Commercial Advertiser, 23 February 1901.
17. Alan Dale, "Bertha Kalisch, the Yiddish Favorite, Plays Hamlet," New York Morning Journal, 31 January 1901.
18. A. H. Fromenson, "Kalish as Hamlet." The "conceited ass" clearly refers to Thomashefsky. David Kessler and Sigmund Feinman, who had both played Hamlet in New York, seem to be the most likely candidates for the other descriptions. Both were stocky, but since Kessler revelled in playing coarse characters, he was probably the "hoarse butcher" and Feinman the "man with a chip on his shoulder."
19. Commercial Advertiser, 23 February 1901.
20. "Madame Kalisch as Hamlet," New York Dramatic Mirror, 9 February 1901.
21. Dale, "Bertha Kalisch, the Yiddish Favorite, Plays Hamlet."
22. Hamlet, translated by B. Vilenski, 23. Manuscript in Perlmutter Collection, YIVO Archives. On the title page is stamped, "Property of Leopold Spachner" (Kalish's husband). Also on the title page is the inscription, "The role of 'Hamlet' specially adapted from the German for Madam Bertha Kalish by B. Vilenski." All subsequent quotations from this manuscript will be cited in the text.
- Kalish's personal papers (under "Kalich") in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center include a marked copy of the Schlegel translation. Her cuts in that copy are far too few to match the critics' descriptions of her original production. She seems to have used the Schlegel version for a later production; a note on the folder reads, "Hamlet [in German] produced by Kalich in Yiddish at Thalia Theatre [n.d.]. Prompt copy, with Kalich's handwritten finale and cuts in German."
23. Dale, "Bertha Kalisch, the Yiddish Favorite, Plays Hamlet."
24. For a brief biographical sketch, see The American Jewish Year Book, 5665 (1904/1905), ed. Cyrus Adler and Henrietta Szold (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1904), 74.
25. New York Dramatic Mirror, 9 February 1901.
26. In fact, the Vilenski text initially follows the same order of scenes as the original, but after Laertes' farewell, the translation repeats I.i and connects it to the other ghost scenes. I suspect that the text opens in the castle and connects the ghost scenes for several reasons: 1. This was the traditional order in

Goldberg's translation for Thomashefsky, the structure of which Vilenski seems to follow everywhere else in his version; 2. The Commercial Advertiser observes that "several scenes are telescoped together"; 3. The fact that Vilenski uses the "telescoping" technique elsewhere, notably in the final scenes of the play, makes it likely that he would do the same here, where such a technique could save considerable effort both in the changing of scenery and the shifting of the audience's attention; 4. The initial ghost scene is written in different handwriting than most of the rest of the text; and 5. The page on which it is written is unnumbered, while Shakespeare's I.ii begins on page 1.

27. Dale, "Bertha Kalisch, the Yiddish Favorite, Plays Hamlet."

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Most likely Leyzer Goldstein, the only male by that last name listed in Zylbercweig who was both old enough to play the role and who was performing in the United States at the time. See Zylbercweig, Leksikon, 1:382.

31. New York Dramatic Mirror, 9 February 1901.

32. Commercial Advertiser, 23 February 1901.

33. Ibid.

34. Dale, "Madame Kalisch, the Yiddish Favorite, Plays Hamlet."

35. New York Dramatic Mirror, 9 February 1901.

36. Fromenson, "Kalish as Hamlet."

37. New York Dramatic Mirror, 9 February 1901.

38. Dale, "Bertha Kalisch, the Yiddish Favorite, Plays Hamlet."

39. Commercial Advertiser, 23 February 1901.

40. Fromenson, "Kalish as Hamlet."

41. Commercial Advertiser, 23 February 1901.

42. Winter, 1:374.

43. Compare IV.vi of Shakespeare's text, where a Sailor gives Horatio a similar letter, which he then reads aloud.

44. New York Dramatic Mirror, 9 February 1901.

45. Dale, "Bertha Kalisch, the Yiddish Favorite, Plays Hamlet."
46. New York Dramatic Mirror, 9 February 1901.
47. Hutchins Hapgood, "Star of Yiddish Stage: Bertha Kalisch," The Sunday Telegraph, 27 March 1904.
48. Henry Tyrrell, "Bertha Kalich--the Yiddish Duse," Theatre Magazine, July 1905, 162.

CHAPTER 6

"A TRUE JEWISH JEW": THREE YIDDISH SHYLOCKS

"Of all of Shakespeare's works, The Merchant of Venice holds the greatest interest for Jews," wrote critic and theatre historian Bernard Gorin in 1911.¹ Gorin's observation may seem so obvious today as to verge on the axiomatic, but Yiddish theatre practice in the 1890s would not in itself have led to such a conclusion. The only recorded Yiddish production of the play in New York during that decade ran for just one weekend in February 1894,² and such a commercial failure would have been an unlikely export to other American cities. The American Yiddish theatre's only other nineteenth-century encounter with the play came in 1899 with the publication of poet Joseph Bovshover's translation.

In 1901, Jacob Adler starred in the first Yiddish production of The Merchant of Venice to make a lasting impression on critics and audiences. Over the next half century, three towering figures on the American Yiddish stage would periodically bring Shylock back to life, in German, Yiddish, and English, in full translations, excerpts, and an adaptation. Adler, Rudolf Schildkraut, and Maurice Schwartz would use the role to explore the Jew's place in the Diaspora more directly than most Shakespearean translations--and even Judaized adaptations--allowed. Previous productions of Shakespeare in Yiddish had begun to establish the playwright's place in the culture, but these three interpreters led

audiences to examine their adopted playwright differently, under the often harsh light of what the play seemed to say about Jews. While the play never caught on commercially in the Yiddish theatre, these three interpreters of the role would lead Jewish critics to try to account for the great poet's depiction of the vengeful Venetian Jew as either an unforgivable libel, a defensible lapse, or an admirable work of art.

Adler, Schildkraut, and Schwartz each played some of their performances of Shylock in non-Yiddish venues, thus attracting even more attention from outside the Jewish "ghetto" than Bertha Kalish had done with her Hamlet. In fact, Kalish herself reported that it was Jacob Adler's Broadway debut as Shylock in 1903 that attracted a number of producers, including Charles Frohman and Harrison Grey Fiske, to the Lower East Side to scout for talent.³

Shylock would allow the Yiddish theatre to demonstrate its versatility in a number of ways. Adler won praise for bringing a Yiddish-speaking Shylock to Broadway. Schildkraut imported a European Shylock to the Bowery. Schwartz performed scenes from the play in English in a vaudeville house, later adapted an prose alteration of the story for the stage, and ultimately rejected the role altogether because of its anti-Semitism.

The prominence of the actors playing Shylock, the publicity their performances generated, and the problematic

treatment of Jews in the play caused Shylock to evolve in the American Yiddish consciousness. The play's center of interest for Jewish audiences--its treatment of the Jew's status in the Diaspora--remained constant. In the real world, however, that status was anything but constant during the first half of the twentieth century, one of the most turbulent periods in Jewish history. Interpretations of the role also changed over time, and audiences who initially saw the character as a curiosity engendered by the great Gentile poet's controversial depiction of the Jew found increasing complexity in the play with each new Yiddish approach to the role.

The first Yiddish actor to make his mark as Shylock was Jacob P. Adler, who had played a prominent role in bringing Shakespeare's plays to Yiddish audiences before appearing in The Merchant of Venice. In his memoirs, however, the tradition in which he placed Shylock had less to do with Shakespeare than with a certain species of Jewish character, which included The Jewish King Lear's Dovid Moyshelles as well as Shylock:

He is a patriarch. He is a higher being. And his personality is the accumulated legacy, the gathering force of generations, and it comes through in his language, his deportment, his appearance, his face, and his gait. There is a certain grandeur in this Jew, the triumph born of long suffering, of intellect, of a character raised by two governesses: high traditions and an endless series of spiritual sufferings. This Jew, who has seen everything, experienced and survived everything, possesses a great strength, and its beauty radiates throughout his entire being and brings him to life.⁴

Accordingly, Adler set out to present neither the grotesquely

comic Shylock that preceded eighteenth-century actor Charles Macklin's conception of the role, nor the cruel, petty, unbending Shylock of numerous other interpreters. Adler's Shylock was most akin to that of late nineteenth-century English actor Henry Irving, who called Shylock "a bloody-minded monster,--but you mustn't play him so, if you wish to succeed; you must get some sympathy with him."⁵

Adler himself, in a 1902 interview, claimed to have seen Irving's Shylock many years earlier, in London:

Irving is the greatest actor I have seen . . . But, strongly as I was impressed with the Englishman's Shylock, I felt all the more conviction in my own conception of the Jew of Venice, whom I would portray as a type, not as a caricature.⁶

Adler, as might be expected from a Jewish actor, sought to go beyond Irving in making Shylock sympathetic, and felt that the character "should be shown well-dressed and proud of mien, instead of the poor and cringing figure which custom has made familiar."⁷ This reading came across to the reviewers, who generally concurred that "Mr. Adler's conception of Shylock's demand for justice and the pound of flesh is not the bloodthirsty one to which we have grown accustomed."⁸ Adler's Shylock therefore followed in the Irving tradition, but "not even Sir Henry Irving," wrote one critic, "has made an appeal for the sympathy of the audience such as Mr. Adler put into his performance."⁹

While also following Irving's lead in presenting a strikingly picturesque figure, Adler's Shylock was "a man of

the people and thoroughly Oriental, not an aristocrat of the Ghetto, like Sir Henry Irving's."¹⁰ In other words, "Mr. Adler has revived the Jewish Shylock. He takes a place in the synagogue; not among the nobility, but among those who are typical."¹¹ Typical, but by no means ordinary: "It is distinctly oriental--in the cast of the face, the swarthy coloring, the long, rich robes, and the dignity of bearing."¹²

Adler's Merchant of Venice--under the title Shylock--opened at the People's Theatre in New York on 5 December 1901 to favorable reviews, but he would soon seek more widespread recognition. Only one month later, Bernard Gorin reported that

Adler is not as happy as could be expected in the laurels he has won playing in good drama . . . and his warmest wish is to appear one day before an American audience in one of the Broadway theatres.¹³

Adler's fans at the People's were American, of course, but not in the sense that Gorin meant. They were not, simply speaking, in the majority, and joining the majority promised greater rewards, in terms of both wealth and recognition, than the greatest success in a minority culture could offer.

Adler's wish was granted in early May 1903, when his Yiddish-speaking Shylock, supported by a cast of English-speaking actors, performed in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Boston before playing for one week at the American Theatre in New York. The same theatre again hosted Adler's Yiddish Shylock two years later, in May 1905, also with an English-

speaking supporting cast.

At least one Jewish critic writing in English felt compelled to prepare his readership for Adler's debut on English-language stages. The Jewish Exponent catered to well-heeled Jewish Philadelphians, more akin in manners and taste to the upper-class Gentiles they sought to emulate than the Yiddish-speaking Jews whom they tended to keep at arm's length. The newspaper's theatre critic, Louis Lipsky, predicted that "the audience may be led to ridicule or dislike by the language and the manners of this new interpreter." In order "to minimize as much as possible the incongruous effect he is likely to produce," Lipsky went on to remind his readers that all actors have certain physical limitations, and to assure them that Adler's many virtues as an actor far outweighed his shortcomings. In fact, Lipsky concluded, Adler "commands histrionic abilities which would have opened the theatres of continental Europe to him if he had played in classic drama and spoken a continental language."¹⁴

Lipsky may very well have been right, for while generally praising Adler's performance, the English-language critics sometimes found his acting too flamboyant. The Globe's critic observed that Adler's "extravagant gestures" did not always succeed with the Broadway audience, who "tittered at some of these things--and not unjustly. They were vivid, they were powerful, but for our more sluggish temperaments they were overdone."¹⁵ The New York Times, on the other hand, found

Adler at times too naturalistic for his own good:

Adler failed, in so far as he did fail, because his artistic good sense impelled him to give, on the whole, a simple, unaffected, and naturalistic rendering of the part, to eschew the Hebrew prophet of modern sentimentality, and to stick to the Shylock of Shakespeare--and of the Ghetto. He thus fell, as it were, between two stools.¹⁶

Most of the reviewers, however, found Adler's performance effective: neither too simple nor overly extravagant. In fact, the Globe and Times reviewers may simply have picked up on a central quality of Adler's Shylock--sharp contrast, alternating between subdued and nearly hysterical.

In time-honored Yiddish theatrical fashion, Adler used a script that drastically cut the original text to heighten the leading character's prominence. This is not difficult to do when the character is central to begin with: snip some of Polonius's lines, cut the Fool down to size, and your Hamlet or Lear looms even larger. Shylock, however, appears in only five scenes out of twenty in the first place, making the power of his presence all the more remarkable. To make him the central character in terms of stage time requires a reworking of the plot, a restructuring of the text.¹⁷

Adler's translation put Shylock onstage for over half the play and ended with the focus on the money lender by cutting Act V altogether. Adler was not the first to increase Shylock's stage time; he borrowed from Irving the famous pantomime in which Shylock returns home, knocks on his door, realizes that his daughter Jessica has left him, and breaks

down in sorrow. The Adler adaptation went much further, however, all but eliminating the double love story plot. Such cuts not only made Shylock more prominent, but also drastically changed the tone of the play.

The shift in tone was surely intentional, for as problematic as Shylock is to a Jewish audience, a Jewish daughter abandoning her father and converting to Christianity is the stuff of tragedy, not comedy. After all, this was the culture that produced Sholom Aleichem's Tevye the Dairyman, who went into mourning when a far more devoted daughter married a Gentile. There is little in The Merchant of Venice that would strike a Jewish audience as comic, but then the reading of the play that sees tragic dignity in Shylock is what would draw an Adler, a Schildkraut, or a Schwartz to the role in the first place.

In order to support his reading of the character as wronged patriarch, Adler began with levity, implying that the item in the contract allowing him to cut out a pound of Antonio's flesh if repayment of his loan was late was nothing more than a joke--a "merry bond," as Shylock himself puts it. One reviewer saw Adler's drawing up of the bond as "rather a merry quip--one almost imagines that he intends showing the unique bond to his colleagues on the Rialto with a laugh."¹⁸ However, Adler added a gesture to the end of the same scene that seemed to suggest the opposite conclusion. Instead of sending Shylock off before the others, as Shakespeare does,

the Yiddish text leaves him alone on stage after they go, and has the curtain fall as he "raises his handkerchief and points with his staff."¹⁹ As one critic described the action, "Round and round his hands he twists his great purple handkerchief, as though he were twisting Antonio tighter and tighter still. His grave face has turned all vindictive cunning."²⁰

If Shylock's wrath began to simmer after his first scene, many observers found that his emotional turning point came when he discovered that his daughter had run off, though Adler kept Shylock's anger contained until later. He entered to the accompaniment of quiet music--composed for the production by Joseph Rumshinsky--and knocked twice on the door with his staff. When he realized that Jessica had gone, he tore his garment in a symbolic gesture of mourning, sighed, and sank to the ground "as though he were gathering little by little all that has happened. A deep, shuddering, convulsive sigh"--"oy, oy," according to the stage directions (19)--"shows his realization of it. It is the simplest of means, and once more they prove the most moving."²¹

In Shylock's next scene, Adler's tone changed from mournful to hysterical:

From a very low and quiet key he lifts his acting to the highest and sharpest. In the scene with Tubal it is all a fury of rage and revenge. Or it chokes with grief. Or it shrieks with avarice. Shylock's dignity and self-mastery are gone. He shakes his staff at the jeering bystanders. He clutches at Tubal. He barely totters off the stage.²²

He would maintain this tone in the beginning of the courtroom scene, but in the meantime the rest of the company took care of the subplot.

One of the most striking features of the Yiddish text is its treatment of Portia, played in the original production by Adler's wife Sara. Shakespeare introduces Portia in the second scene, but Sara Adler was kept waiting in the wings until the middle of Act III, where the entire casket subplot was summarily executed (in both senses of the word). That is, she and Nerissa evaluate the suitors, Morocco and Aragon are omitted entirely, and Bassanio enters and chooses the lead casket without much deliberation. One can almost hear the text heave a sigh of relief: now it can get back to Shylock.

Adler's Shylock ended shortly before the end of Shakespeare's fourth act, and the critics generally agreed that the final scene was the high point of his performance. He began it like a cornered animal (which, in a sense, he is), leaping at Antonio until he is forcibly restrained. However, Adler told an interviewer that Shylock's apparent eagerness to do violence was purely for show:

That such a court will interpret the law in his favor, the ironical Jew is not for one instant fatuous enough to suppose. . . . The real revenge that Shylock contemplates is not to take the pound of flesh which is legally forfeit to him, but to show the world that his despised ducats have actually bought and paid for it. His whetting the knife on his sole is a hyperbolic menace: his sardonic smile, accompanying this action, is the only sharp edge that shall cut the self-humiliated Merchant.²⁵

At least one critic realized what Adler was trying to do,

noting that "When he sharpened the knife to cut the pound of flesh from the bankrupt . . . Shylock slyly noted whether the proud merchant quailed."²⁴

Adler's Shylock regained his composure after leaping at Antonio, and in the moment of his deepest humiliation, showed his greatest dignity:

Gratiano had been making a number of passes at him, which he had beaten off after the manner of a bird, with weak clutching of the hands; then he brushes the impress of Gratiano's hand from his sleeve, arranges his hair and coat, his beard, and with calm contempt for the court and all those interested in the wrongful miscarriages of justice, passes out, leaving a stern sense of disapproval of the whole proceeding.²⁵

The production ended there. Concluding the play with Shylock's moment of pride-in-disgrace rather than with the fanciful resolution of the lovers' plot leaves the audience with the emphasis on persecution of the Jew. Instead of the bantering exchange of rings that could come out of a folktale, the audience is left with an all-too-real circumstance of history: convert or else.

It is this emphasis that ultimately sets the Yiddish interpretations of the role apart from those of their Gentile colleagues, as poet and critic Morris Vintshevski was quick to point out:

. . . as hard as Henry Irving's task was to depict a human Jew while remaining true to the words of the great Englishman's play, it is all the more remarkable when a Jew undertakes to perform Shakespeare's words before a Jewish audience. That takes courage, and that alone deserves the attention of every lover of true art. . . .

Mr. Adler's Shylock will forever stand even higher than Irving's, for however great the latter may be, he can never sufficiently understand the Venetian Jewish

merchant's pride . . . Adler's heart speaks where Irving's art paints . . . and he does not need a nose that looks like a half-moon with his back to the world in order to portray his Shylock, to put flesh and blood and a living soul into Shakespeare's words. In short, his Shylock is a true Jewish Jew.²⁶

To a critic like Vintshevski, who values Adler's ethnic authenticity in the role over Irving's mimetic skill, Adler epitomizes what Shylock should be: an apotheosis of Jewish suffering during centuries of anti-Semitism.

Of course, Adler's Shylock was Jewish in another distinctive feature: his language. As Louis Lipsky pointed out, "Never has a Jew who came from the congested life of the Jewish people, who stands so much for the non-emancipated Jew, interpreted the character in the language of the Ghetto par excellence."²⁷ A curious feature of many of the reviews in both the Yiddish and English press is their praise of the Yiddish language itself, which they welcomed into the fold as if it were a talented young actor who had finally found his way to the big time after arduously honing his craft in obscure garrets and saloons. The Jewish Exponent paid Yiddish the backhanded compliment of being

a language which many of those who had heard it in the past had deemed harsh and raucous, but which seemed, as uttered by this actor, replete with gentle cadences and harmonies. It did not obtrude itself grotesquely, as many had feared it would, into the immortal English of Shakespeare, but proved a telling vindication of a language which . . . contains many gems of literature, both poetry and prose.²⁸

More mainstream newspapers such as the New York Herald concurred, writing of the production's bilingualism, "it is

not the smallest tribute to [Adler's] art that this fact interfered but little with the general enjoyment of his important scenes."²⁹

The Yiddish press fairly beamed at how well the mother tongue had acquitted itself. Critic Moyshe Katz sounded like a proud father:

It is simply a pleasure to hear how a Yiddish monologue sounds on the English stage when it comes from the mouth of a great actor. . . . Yiddish sounds so smooth and so beautiful when presented cleanly, without daytshmerish, that Yiddish actors on the Yiddish stage may take this as an example.³⁰

Another reviewer crowed that Yiddish "showed on the stage of the Academy of Music that it can be classic, that it sounds good, and that it can convey even Shakespeare's imagery."³¹ Linguist Alexander Harkavy had made precisely the same claims for Yiddish in 1897, calling it "a language not just for simple dramas but also for sophisticated ones."³² With the great English poet being performed in Yiddish on English stages, Harkavy and other champions of mame-loshn had their ultimate vindication.

In one sense, Yiddish speakers' excitement at another culture's recognition of their mother tongue was simply the next step in the process that had inspired the adaptation of Shakespeare into Yiddish in the first place; after the Yiddish theatre established its legitimacy in the eyes of its native audience, it sought to do the same with a broader one. The second quest can be seen as part of a larger struggle; Eastern European Jews' efforts to find acceptance in the eyes of

Gentile America. One Yiddish journalist expressed how this desire manifested itself on the eve of Adler's Broadway debut:

Jews felt a sort of patriotic warmth. Every one of us hoped that Adler would succeed, that he would be applauded, that the critics would have a high opinion of him. Every one of us felt that it would not be nice if the star of the Yiddish theatre should fail.³³

They were not disappointed.

Being the first actor to perform in Yiddish on Broadway made Adler a de facto ambassador to the Gentile world, and American Jewry, intensely self-conscious about its image in the eyes of its non-Jewish neighbors, has always cherished such envoys. A joke that sums up this self-consciousness tells of a young Jewish boy who runs home to report to his grandfather that Babe Ruth hit two home runs that day. The grandfather thinks about this for a moment, and then asks, "What this Ruth fellow did--is it good for the Jews?" In Adler's case, the question was more germane, and the answer obvious; his success with American audiences was undoubtedly good for the Jews.

Rudolf Schildkraut's arrival in New York in 1911 was also widely heralded by the Yiddish press as being good for the Jews, or at least for those Jews who attended the Yiddish theatre. Schildkraut (1862-1930) had boyhood contact of a sort with Yiddish theatre, though much of his career would take a different path. He grew up in Galatz, Romania, where his parents ran a hotel that was frequented by Yiddish actors, including such rising stars as David Kessler and Sigmund

Mogulesco. Schildkraut entered the profession via the German-language stage, after falling in love with German literature at his boarding school in Transylvania and earning the nickname "actor" for his recitations of German poetry and imitations of actors who passed through the area.

In his mid-teens, Schildkraut joined a troupe of those actors, and spent the next four or five years with different traveling companies, his goal the whole time being to perform in Vienna. He achieved this goal in 1892, when he was hired to act in comedies and operettas at the Raimund Theatre, but although he began to make a name for himself there, he was still unsatisfied; he wanted serious dramatic roles. His opportunity for a change came when the great German tragedian Friedrich Mitterwurzer (1844-1897) saw Schildkraut perform and offered to take him on as a protégé. Schildkraut, already a fan, readily accepted, thus gaining not only a gifted teacher, but also a vigorous promoter. This support was taken away upon Mitterwurzer's untimely death from accidentally swallowing poison, but shortly thereafter, Schildkraut was hired by the director of the new Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg, where his greatest success in his five-year tenure as leading man was as King Lear. Before long, his performance of another Shakespearean role would win him even greater notoriety.

In 1905, Max Reinhardt, still a fledgling director, invited Schildkraut to star in his production of The Merchant

of Venice at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. The play was staged in what was to become signature Reinhardt style--elegant, detailed, lavish:

There were handsome sets, costumes out of Carpaccio and Veronese, street cries, snatches of song, incidental music by Humperdinck; a revolving stage reinforced the impression of a magical self-contained world given over to pleasure.³⁴

Given Reinhardt's emphasis on spectacle and on the more sanguine elements of the play, Shylock was not his primary focus. However, Schildkraut still managed to make an impact, as Hermann Sinsheimer points out:

A full-blooded actor and a conscious Jew, he entered into the feelings of a hunted, tormented and therefore unbalanced being, through whom generations of Jews voiced their shrill protest against their persecutors of all times.³⁵

Schildkraut would soon bring this interpretation to the United States, where his Shylock would decidedly be the center of attention.

His arrival on New York's Yiddish stage in the spring of 1911 created such a sensation that it even threatened to relegate the great Jacob Adler to the sidelines for a time, at least according to a cartoon in the Yiddish satirical magazine Der groyser kundes. The drawing shows Adler, his bloated body filling his box at the theatre, looking on with a grimace as Schildkraut takes center stage as Shylock (Fig. 4). The caption, pretending to reveal Adler's thoughts at the moment, lampoons his supposed venality and callousness through a parody of Shylock's most famous speech:



ה'תרס"ב

Fig. 4

Am I not a human being, as he is? If the actors' union hands me its demands, do I not cry? And if I am sued for breach of contract, do I not laugh? And if I cut a fresh porterhouse steak, do I not draw blood? So why can he act better than I?³⁶

Fictional though the situation depicted in the cartoon may have been, it reflected reality in at least one respect: the reverence with which fans of the Yiddish theatre had for Schildkraut's success as a German Shakespearean.

Schildkraut's entry into the Yiddish theatre echoed that of Morris Morrison twenty years earlier³⁷; the Galatz-born Morrison also performed in Europe with one of the great modern European theatre directors (in his case, the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen), acted in German theatres in the United States, and finally appeared, to great fanfare, on the Yiddish stage. There were two crucial differences, however; Schildkraut was a major star before his Yiddish debut, but not too big a star to learn Yiddish for his roles.³⁸

The remarkable combination of Schildkraut's German stardom and his strong Jewish identity led reporters for the Yiddish press to file story after story on the actor's life and art, the following note of admiration typifying their tone:

How a Jew who was born in Romania was able to reach such a high level in the artistic world in Germany is a riddle to everyone. However, it shows how, with his great talent, he triumphed over every obstacle that stands in the way of every Jew who aspires to greatness.³⁹

As great as the actor's achievements were, many observers found it all the more remarkable that his success had not

prevented him from taking unabashed pleasure in such Yiddish entertainment as the commercially successful melodramas listed in the following remark:

They say he is a Jew, and what a Jew! A Jewish Jew, a Jew who gets inspired by the 'Pintele yid,' 'Yidishe neshome,' 'Yidishe harts,' and all the Jewish bastards and heretics who have flourished on our stage in the last few years. This is not because he is such an expert on true art, but because he . . . relishes everything Jewish.⁴⁰

In spite of the occasional recognition of a Bertha Kalish or a Jacob Adler, Yiddish speakers had by no means gotten over their sense of the cultural inferiority of their mother tongue. Schildkraut's participation in the culture would add a new dimension; if a Jew who was not raised in Yiddish voluntarily entered the fold after demonstrating his bona fides in Gentile culture, then surely Yiddish had worthwhile ingredients to add to the cultural melting pot.

The Yidishes tageblat reviewer felt that Schildkraut successfully translated his Jewishness into a Jewish Shylock; so successfully, in fact, that there was "certainly not a more Jewish Shylock than the one Mr. Schildkraut presented." Furthermore, "He did not rage, he did not storm, did not make all of the broad gestures and declamations that one usually hears in classical drama, but played an old-fashioned Jewish merchant."⁴¹

However, not everyone was so impressed with either Schildkraut's expression of his Jewish identity or his ability to play a Jew. Critic Joel Entin suggested that Schildkraut's

success in Germany came at a price: "When someone has since childhood kept his distance from the Yiddish masses, from their life and creativity, it is difficult to rejoin them." Entin felt that this distance from the Jewish people hindered Schildkraut's ability to create authentic Jewish characters, including Shylock: "Schildkraut turns the Spanish-Oriental Shylock of the time of the Venetian doges into a worthless Jew from the old market" and "entirely obliterates the little that is picturesque" in the image of the medieval money-lender.⁴²

For Entin, as for many other reviewers, the Jewishness (or lack thereof) of Schildkraut's Shylock was crucial to the success or failure of the performance. After all, if the actor failed to present an authentic Jew, then the Christian characters' behavior toward him would no longer be authentic manifestations of anti-Semitism, and the focal point of the play for most Jewish viewers--as a commentary on relations between Jews and Gentiles--would therefore dissolve. Entin was disappointed that Schildkraut, the "naturalistic artist," failed to find the beauty in the character: "His Shylock is naturalistically brutal, in one or two places somewhat melodramatic, and absolutely unsuited to the romantically elevated, poetic . . . Shakespearean drama."⁴³

In 1911 at least, most of the critics who saw Schildkraut agreed. A few months before Entin issued his verdict on the performance, another critic contrasted the Shylocks of Schildkraut and his German colleague Ernst Possart, who played

the role within two weeks of each other at the Irving Place Theatre, then a home of German-language performances:

Schildkraut makes his Jew a man socially inferior to Possart's. His is the money grabber, the low, vindictive Jew while Possart's is the gentleman, vindictive perhaps, but capable of restraining his hatred. Schildkraut gets comedy out of the part at every opportunity, while Possart is too serious to consider caricature. Schildkraut is more vigorous, ferocious and sometimes rants.⁴⁴

Two months later, a Yiddish critic reviewing Schildkraut's performance around the corner at the New Yiddish Theatre similarly concluded that Schildkraut's Shylock "is not the least bit idealized. He plays a Jew for whom money-making has become a consuming passion."⁴⁵

Playwright and sometime critic Leon Kobrin put a paradoxical spin on Schildkraut's interpretation: the actor had failed to present a truly Jewish Shylock because he had so successfully uncovered the soul of Shakespeare's Shylock. Although, Kobrin felt, "the great Schildkraut sought to embody in his Shylock the Jew who has been oppressed and persecuted for a thousand years," that was not the Shylock Shakespeare created, and as a great actor, Schildkraut could not help but be true to Shakespeare's creation:

The more artistically the artist plays Shylock, the more dark and unsympathetic he comes across and the more hatred he brings upon himself, since the truly great artist reflects in his performance the spirit and the mood of the poet and of the poet's work. . . . Schildkraut presented the Shylock that Shakespeare created--if not the body, then certainly the soul. The mirror is not at fault for showing an ugly face.⁴⁶

Kobrin's dim view of Shakespeare's Jew was not far from that

of critic Jacob Milkh, who declared in an 1911 essay--inspired, he said, by seeing Schildkraut's Shylock--that the character as Shakespeare conceived him "has not a drop of Jewishness in him."⁴⁷

Milkh's essay focused on the character of Shylock himself rather than with the specific interpretation that inspired it, but he mentioned one minute detail of Schildkraut's stage business almost in passing. In his first scene, Shylock gives a Biblical precedent for charging interest and remarks by way of a preamble, "This Jacob from our holy Abram was / (As his wise mother wrought in his behalf) / The third possessor; ay, he was the third--" [I.iii.72-74] Milkh observed that during these lines, Schildkraut counted to three on his fingers, as if he was counting off the Hebrew patriarchs to himself. Milkh interprets the gesture as showing Shylock's minimal Jewish knowledge and, like Kobrin, does not fault Schildkraut for the choice. After all, it is consistent with Shylock's general ignorance of Jewish matters, such as his swearing by the Sabbath in the courtroom scene:

Shakespeare evidently never saw a Jew in his life. Shylock's declaration that he has sworn by the Sabbath to get revenge sounds like "a Gentile speaks Yiddish." One sees that a Gentile has invented a thing that is very precious to Jews. Well, the Sabbath is indeed a great and holy thing for Jews, but we do not swear by the Sabbath.⁴⁸

To Milkh, Shylock's Jewishness fails to run deeper than certain quasi-Jewish details on the character's surface.

However, there are other ways to interpret Schildkraut's

counting off the patriarchs--a small detail that nevertheless has implications for his overall interpretation. It can be seen as a manifestation of his tendency to find comedy in the role at every opportunity (according to an earlier observer); Shylock enjoys an unusual moment of power over his oppressors and draws it out as long as possible. It could also suggest the opposite of Milkh's interpretation of the movement: that is, Shylock having such confidence in his knowledge of the Bible that he lords it over Antonio and Bassanio. In other words, he counts for their supposed benefit, not for his own; he knows perfectly well which patriarch Jacob is, but he assumes that they do not.

This last reading of the gesture is of a piece with another Schildkraut invention that intensified Shylock's Jewishness beyond anything that either Shakespeare or the performance tradition of the role would have suggested. A critic attending a 1920 performance said of Schildkraut's Shylock that "only such a Jew as he could mumble 'Shema yisroyl' when he is commanded to convert."⁴⁹ The Shema, as it is usually called--"Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One"--comes from Deuteronomy 6:4. Strictly speaking, it is not a prayer, but rather a fundamental affirmation of commitment to Judaism. By uttering the Shema, Schildkraut authenticated his Shylock as an intensely Jewish figure, a Jew who appeals to his God as his Jewishness is being stripped away.

Perhaps theatregoers in 1911 did not have the chance to hear this striking addition to the courtroom scene, for at the time, Schildkraut presented a Shylock whose flamboyance was too much for some critics and audiences. Leon Kobrin felt that in spite of shortcomings in Shakespeare's character, Schildkraut had achieved greatness at certain moments in the performance, but "I do not at all like his falling to the ground when he loses" in the courtroom.⁵⁰ The critic from the Mirror, who had seen Schildkraut at the Irving Place Theatre, was even more put off by such extravagant displays of emotion: "Many there are in Schildkraut's audience whose nervous laughter has to be checked by hisses. Not that they mean to be discourteous, but they are at a loss to know whether he means his Jew to be a burlesque."⁵¹

Schildkraut toned down the emotional quality of his performance considerably when he returned to the role in 1920 at the Jewish Art Theatre. Director David Belasco, himself one of the foremost promoters of stage naturalism in his day, declared, "Schildkraut is the most natural Shylock I have ever seen, and I have seen all of the best Shylocks for a generation. I saw him some years ago and he was inclined to be theatrical, but his characterization is more mellowed now."⁵² Schildkraut's 1911 performance had its quiet moments, such as in the courtroom, where one critic praised "Schildkraut's silence, which speaks so loudly."⁵³ Similarly, the 1920 production was not without its broad

gestures, but the overall tone of the performance seems to have changed, becoming quieter over time.

Part of the critical success of Schildkraut's Shylock derived from his ability to pack a world of meaning into a small gesture, such as uttering the Shema, or, as Bernard Gorin described, "a small movement of the hand that Schildkraut makes when he curses his daughter. Before the curse can tear itself from his throat, he puts his hand over his mouth."⁵⁴ Even during the 1920 run, though, Schildkraut did not always resist broader expressions of Shylock's torment. Like Adler, Schildkraut placed his personal stamp on the pantomime after Jessica's elopement, a scene also described by Gorin:

All that he says is "Jessica," and that is natural. He runs around the house and looks for his daughter; we hear this by the rapid steps on the boards and by the quickness with which the doors slam. He is not on the stage at all during this, but the audience can picture it as if it were played before their eyes. And when he comes out and calls "Jessica," we hear such heartbreak in his voice and such desperation in his tone. . . . If Schildkraut were satisfied with that call and did not collapse on the bench in front of the house, the impression might have been much stronger.⁵⁵

By 1920, Yiddish audiences had seen Shakespearean characters swoon time and again: Hamlet upon first seeing the ghost, Juliet after first meeting Romeo, Romeo upon learning of his banishment. On the whole, however, Schildkraut seems to have tempered his 1920 Shylock enough to impress both Yiddish- and English-speaking critics.

In spite of all the favorable notices in both languages,

however, Schildkraut's Merchant of Venice was not a commercial success. Gorin attempted to explain why: "The Yiddish audience has no great love of The Merchant of Venice. . . . In a Yiddish theatre, one goes to see Shylock as a curiosity, or one comes to see the actor who plays Shylock, and such an audience is not a large one."⁵⁶ Not until a quarter of a century later, under the managerial and dramatic talents of Maurice Schwartz, would a revised Shylock make a strong impression at the American Yiddish box office.

When Ukrainian-born Maurice (Avrom-Moyshe) Schwartz (1890-1960) was eleven, his father sailed to America in search of economic opportunity, and soon sent for the rest of the family. On the way, however, there was a problem with the ticket, and Maurice had to stay behind, alone, in Liverpool. He spent the next two years in London, working at various jobs, singing in a cantor's choir, and going to the Yiddish theatre, until his father finally located him and brought him to New York.

Schwartz attended school in New York for a short time, but left to work in a factory, studying at night with a German teacher who read him the German classics and Shakespeare. He soon began acting in New York, where, if the following romanticized account from the Herald Tribune is to be believed, he first tried on Shylock's gaberdine:

For his first and rather poignant appearance as Shylock Schwartz has to think back to the age of fourteen. The Williamsburg Bridge was his stage, the sky his proscenium arch, the moon his electrician. The members of a small

dramatic club, which he had founded during his first year in this city, were his sole audience at the night interpretations.⁵⁷

Schwartz left New York to work as both actor and stage manager in Baltimore and Chicago. During that period, he also worked unofficially as a director, an experience that would serve him well when he returned to New York.

In 1918, Schwartz inaugurated a new era in the Yiddish theatre when he became director, manager, and star actor at the Irving Place Theatre, the former German-language theatre that had already made an impact on New York's Yiddish stages. The Irving Place was the first of a number of venues for the Yiddish Art Theatre, as Schwartz would later name his company. During the theatre's thirty years of operation, the Yiddish Art Theatre would periodically turn to Shakespeare, and The Merchant of Venice would provide the source material for one of its most commercially successful productions: Shylock un zayn tokhter [Shylock and His Daughter, 1947].

Every Yiddish performer who played Shylock had his models. Adler admired Henry Irving. Schildkraut studied with Friedrich Mitterwurzer. Schwartz's model was none other than Jacob Adler; according to biographer David Dank, "whenever Maurice Schwartz had the opportunity, he wanted to play Jacob Adler's roles."⁵⁸ Adler, in fact, played Shylock at the Yiddish Art Theatre under Schwartz's management on 17 March 1921. When Schwartz received an offer to perform scenes from Merchant in English in a vaudeville theatre in 1930, perhaps

he smiled at yet another similarity to his idol, who had presented his Shylock to English-speaking audiences on Broadway while Schwartz was still a boy.

Schwartz accepted the offer, and in the spring of 1930 presented three scenes from the play in three theatres on the R.K.O. vaudeville circuit. The bill that featured Schwartz started its run at the Franklin Theatre in the Bronx, moved to the Kenmore Theatre in Brooklyn, and wrapped up its run at the Palace Theatre in Manhattan during the week of 19 April 1930. Schwartz felt that he needed to tailor his interpretation to the tastes of the vaudeville audience:

. . . if Shylock underwent a certain humanizing process, he would be more comprehensible to the masses of theatre-goers. I was certain that if the Jew of Venice was divested of the stinging avarice and the vituperative bitterness accorded him as a rule, he would be better understood, even by a vaudeville stage.⁵⁹

This accommodation to the available theatrical conditions was vintage Schwartz. He made his impact on the Yiddish theatre even more as an entrepreneur than as an actor, for all his formidable talents in the latter area. He had a keen sense for what audiences wanted, and a remarkable ability to satisfy those tastes while still managing to take artistic risks.

Perhaps this concession to the theatrical conditions yielded a softer Shylock than Schwartz would have given otherwise. At the time, he saw Shylock as "a quiet, peace-loving Jew, whose mainstays in life are his learning and religion. The loyalty to the memory of his wife, the abounding love for his daughter and his inner dignity guided

his life."⁶⁰ However, if Schwartz muted Shylock's harshness, he still conveyed the power of the character; one critic enjoyed how Schwartz "held in fascinated silence an audience whose risibilities were touched earlier in the program by a female impersonator."⁶¹ John Chapman of the Daily News was similarly struck by the contrasts on the evening's bill:

It is the achievement of Maurice Schwartz that scenes from Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice' do not appear out of place on the current bill at the Palace--the same Palace and the same bill in which Nina Olivette prances through grotesque dances, Horace Heidt's band goes through its jazz rhythms and Ben Blue does his dance of the dying duck.⁶²

The New York Times elaborated on how Schwartz held his own among such offerings:

It is a passionate, furious portrait that he creates, but precise and controlled in diction and held closely to the rhythm of the verse. It leaves no doubt on the part of Mr. Schwartz as to the tragic implications of the character. The 'Hath not a Jew eyes?' speech is delivered in a sort of frenzy, full of despair and a near madness, and the quieter scene with Tubal is likewise replete with revenge and a dark foreboding.⁶³

Schwartz thus accomplished all that he could have hoped for from his vaudeville appearance: extra revenue for his company, which was struggling at the time, as well as generally favorable reviews, though Abraham Cahan concluded, "This production does not give him a true opportunity to show his talent. The three scenes smack too much of melodrama and he has little opportunity to create something on the stage."⁶⁴

Seventeen years later, Schwartz would have a more complete opportunity to do something with the role, although the Shylock he presented then was a much different character.

On 29 September 1947, his Yiddish Art Theatre presented the premiere of Shylock un zayn tokhter [Shylock and His Daughter], adapted by Schwartz from the Hebrew novel Shylocks tokhter [Shylock's Daughter], by Ari Ibn Zahav. The novel grew out of the premise, pointed out by numerous critics of The Merchant of Venice, that Shakespeare had little or no personal contact with Jews. Ibn Zahav claimed to have conducted extensive research on "the Shylock problem" and concluded, as Zalmen Zylbercweig wrote in a preview of the play, "that the way in which Shakespeare's plot presents it is a historical lie, a falsehood that has cost Jews very dearly and that must once and for all be erased."⁶⁵

Ibn Zahav's novel also offered a chance to erase Jewish audiences' resistance to the role, which had hovered over previous Yiddish productions of the play. In 1903, the New York Times suggested that no matter how brilliantly Adler performed the role, "to make Shylock fully sympathetic to a Jewish audience is virtually impossible."⁶⁶ Gorin expressed almost exactly the same sentiment while otherwise praising Rudolf Schildkraut's Shylock years later, concluding that "no matter how much charm a performer showers upon Shylock, he will not be able to make him sympathetic to Jews."⁶⁷ Perhaps a different approach to the character would make him more palatable.

Several of the critics reviewing the play for both the English and Yiddish press stressed that the play should be

assessed on its own merits rather than compared to its source. Richard Watts wrote in the New York Post, "It would most assuredly be both arrogant and untrue to suggest that this new Yiddish drama sets out to put Shakespeare in his place. It is merely an effort to view the same story and the same set of characters from the standpoint of modern historical knowledge and to right an unintentional wrong."⁶⁸ Nakhum Buchwald concurred, and bluntly warned his readers, "One must not go to the play with the false effort of comparing it with 'The Merchant of Venice' in the literary-dramatic sense. To say that 'the original is better' is simply foolishness."⁶⁹ However, the very fact that these and other critics made such disclaimers indicates that they expected audiences to compare the new play and its source on dramaturgic grounds. Though Schwartz's adaptation was based on a novel, critic John Gross's observation is germane: "Writing a play on a Shakespeare theme means setting up in competition with Shakespeare on his own ground--a foolhardy enterprise."⁷⁰ For all its changes, Ibn Zahav's story was close enough to the original in its story and cast of characters to invite--perhaps even demand--such competition. In order to give his play full dramaturgical autonomy, an adaptor would have to move further afield, as West Side Story does from Romeo and Juliet.

In any case, rewriting Shakespeare does not necessarily mean righting Shakespeare, whatever the shortcomings of the

original. Shylock and His Daughter may have a more solid historical basis than Shakespeare's play for its depiction of Venetian Jewish life, but the reworking brings with it new dramaturgical problems. The action takes place in 1559, when the Jews of Venice live under unrelenting Christian oppression. In their misery, they often turn for help to Shylock, a prosperous banker and moneylender, who has saved a number of his fellow Jews from being burned at the stake.

Shylock has lost his wife and three of his four children, and is overjoyed when Samuel Morro, the son of a martyred friend, comes to his home after having escaped the Inquisition. Samuel seems an ideal match for Shylock's only surviving child, Jessica, but Lorenzo, the Gentile supervisor of Shylock's bank, plans to steal her away. She feels stifled by life within the walls of the Venice ghetto, and therefore accepts Lorenzo's invitations to gondola rides and visits to carnivals.

These excursions, however, put Lorenzo in a compromising position. Gratiano and Salanio, who guard the ghetto gate, take Lorenzo for a wealthy man, and demand three thousand ducats in exchange for keeping his outings with Jessica a secret. In desperation, Lorenzo turns to his friend Antonio, whose assets are all out at sea. However, Antonio offers Lorenzo his bond to borrow the money from an ironic source: Shylock's bank.

A reconstructed Shylock is not about to demand a pound of

flesh from a potential debtor, as Schwartz pointed out in the play's program:

There is no case in history indicating that a Jew ever sought a pound of flesh as security for a loan. This is also psychologically impossible in view of the laws laid down by the Jewish religion according to which Jews must salt the meat of fowl and cattle not only to make it kosher, but in order that not even a drop of blood should remain in the meat. Since Shylock is a very religious man, it is impossible that he could have exacted such terms in his contract with Antonio.⁷¹

Critic William Edlin explained how the bargain came about in the adaptation; Shylock

was ready to loan his Christian rival . . . three thousand ducats without any interest. He first decided to charge interest upon Antonio's expressive suggestion; and he decided to insert the point about the pound of flesh into the contract as a joke, and also because Antonio sarcastically suggested that he do so.⁷²

Bending over backwards to make Shylock a pure victim, Ibn Zahav had to bend history a bit too. Why would Shylock, whose living comes from charging interest, waive such earnings for any potential debtor, much less an enemy?

Jessica, meanwhile, has caught a severe cold from all those late-night gondola rides, and when she recovers, decides to travel to Rome to intervene on behalf of Jews being imprisoned there. With letters of introduction from Antonio and his wife Portia, she meets with Church officials and visits the dungeons where Jews are being tortured. While this brings her closer to her fellow Jews, Lorenzo follows her to Rome to try to persuade her to leave her religion. When he brings her back to Venice to see Antonio's lavish palace, she is dazzled by a scene of greater splendor than she can ever

know as a Jew. Antonio and Portia then manage to persuade her to forsake her religion and marry Antonio.

Joel Entin found much of the production to be a pastiche of stock scenes from the Yiddish theatre, but even while noting that the conversion scene was "borrowed from 'historical operas,'" he found it "magical and restrained, and very nicely presented":

The cardinal and the nuns march on in white . . . Jessica is also dressed in white, with a white convert's veil on her head. Without the abundance, we would not feel the impact. We also hear sweet, soft church music that comes from the chiming of bells that do not hurt the ear. And all of this is, against the will of the Jewish onlooker, beautiful to the eye and the ear.⁷³

The conversion scene, not found in Ibn Zahav's novel, showed Schwartz's theatrical ability at its highest level: his ability to give audiences a visceral sensation of Jessica's attraction to the Christian world she has long admired, and which she is about to enter.

The pageantry of the conversion scene, however, was not so powerful as to make critics overlook a problem of character development. As one critic justifiably complained, Jessica's "actions are unmotivated, and we never see into her soul."⁷⁴ Richard Yaffe elaborated on this point:

There is one grave fault in the play--Ibn Zahav's failure to make clear Jessica's motivation. One moment she is another Esther, strong in her will to save her people from the torch and the ghetto; the next moment she accepts weakly the things which are anathema to her. This is not a minor point--on it much of the drama revolves, and a clarification would give the play more stature.⁷⁵

Other critics also lamented that the supporting characters

were not as fully drawn as Shylock, with one going so far as to quip that the production should have been called Shylock's Daughter's Father.⁷⁶

As with interpreters of Shylock who stayed closer to Shakespeare's conception of the character, Ibn Zahav/Schwartz's Shylock became more vengeful upon losing his other daughter, and set out to collect his gruesome bond. Ibn Zahav took care to attribute such vengefulness to Shylock as an individual rather than as a typical Jew by having the Jews of Venice excommunicate him for seeking un-Jewish revenge: the shedding of another man's blood. Shylock, blinded by the desire for vengeance, takes his debtor to court anyway. He retains Samuel Morro as legal counsel, while Antonio is represented by Portia in the guise of Dr. Balthasar. Shylock's claim is upheld--as it is, technically, in The Merchant of Venice--and the Cardinals' pleas for mercy do not deter him any more than the threat of excommunication did. But as he approaches Antonio, carrying the scales to measure the pound of flesh, he breaks down and cries, "I cannot spill blood. I am a Jew." This affirmation of Shylock's faithfulness to his religion is quickly followed by a similar affirmation from Jessica. Forbidden to return to Judaism, she drowns herself instead, and Shylock whispers, "Blessed be Thy Name, oh Truthful Judge."

In their observations of Schwartz's powerful portrayal of Shylock, numerous critics commented on the expansive acting

style of the Yiddish Art Theatre. Some of the English-language critics had trouble appreciating this style, but not Brooks Atkinson:

If the acting in Second Avenue is not precisely in the grand manner, it has animation and latitude, with wide gestures and excitement; and you always know that you are not in a library. Without being intolerably flamboyant, Mr. Schwartz acts with boldness, using his hands continuously, wagging an eloquent forefinger and raising shaggy eyebrows to project astonishment.⁷⁷

Other critics for the English-language papers differed in their assessments of the level of Schwartz's expressiveness in this role, one finding that his "florid style of acting has never stood him in better stead,"⁷⁸ another concluding that "he is more subdued and thus more effective than he has ever been in any of his previous Yiddish Art Theatre productions."⁷⁹

It has been a commonplace for reviewers outside the Yiddish community to describe the acting style of the Yiddish theatre with such adjectives as "emotional," "melodramatic," and "exaggerated." Critics more intimately acquainted with the Yiddish theatre were more likely to see those terms as relative; applying the same adjectives across the board made such descriptions lose their meaning. Schwartz, in fact, was often seen as more controlled than many of his predecessors in the Yiddish theatre, but not throughout Shylock and His Daughter, where Buchwald found him to be "strong in the quiet moments and superficially 'theatrical' in the 'strong' scenes."⁸⁰ Similar words had been used to describe the

Shylock of Jacob Adler, from whom, suggested Joel Entin, Schwartz may have learned how to play the role, and "from whom he may also have learned to shout, and that is a fatal error. When Schwartz shouts, it comes from his stomach--you cannot understand what he is saying."⁸¹

While the audiences who saw Schwartz's Shylock may not have been able to catch every word, they would undoubtedly have understood something deeper about the production: its reflection of the turbulent times surrounding it. The production was sandwiched between two of the pivotal events of modern Jewish history: the Holocaust, which had ended only two years earlier, and the formation of the State of Israel in 1948. C. Gutman divided the audience along the lines of two Jewish organizations active in Palestine at the time:

Those who support the Irgun have almost the whole drama to themselves. Shylock can almost be considered as one of their own: vengeance is the key to his deeds! And those who support the Haganah or who are in general soft Jews who are against bloodshed, can consider Shylock among their ranks at the end: Jewish ethics has triumphed.⁸²

While Gutman saw the play in the context of current events, Buchwald drew a line between it and the grim recent past:

We have before us not a conventional theatre piece, but a tragedy against a real historical background. We receive here Shylock's socio-historical address, so to speak: the Venetian ghetto of the 16th century, with its cruel persecution of Jews, with the Jews' loss of rights that gave Hitler a ready example for the Nuremberg laws.⁸³

If the reactions of Gutman and Buchwald were representative, if the audience as a whole also found parallels between the

persecution depicted in the play and other historic Jewish struggles, then the production went a long way toward accomplishing what Schwartz identified as "the national significance of the play, its moral, the mission it leads, the answer to the three-hundred year-old libel."⁸⁴

Performing in his own adaptation of Ibn Zahav's novel may have had an indelible effect on Schwartz. When he was invited to return to The Merchant of Venice in 1959, he refused, declaring that "it's definitely an anti-Semitic play, and I would not do it."⁸⁵ Schwartz's simple declaration brought the American Yiddish theatre full circle, in a sense, in its treatment of Shylock. In 1894, audiences stayed away from the first recorded professional production. In 1959, the greatest living Yiddish interpreter of the character refused to play the role at all. The frequent eruptions of anti-Semitism in the intervening decades, exploding into the murder of six million Jews, finally made the character too problematic for Yiddish audiences to bear. It is fitting that the Shylock that capped the American Yiddish tradition of the role was a revised version, placed at a slight remove from the sinister mythology that fueled the character's conception and wound its way through the three centuries of his life, onstage and off.

NOTES

1. B. Gorin, "Shylock," Der amerikaner, 3 March 1911.
2. See Chapter 3.
3. Bertha Kalish, "A brodveyer kholem," Der tog, 12 Nov. 1925.
4. Jacob Adler, "Mayn lebn," Di naye varhayt, 2 May 1925.
5. William Winter, Shakespeare on the Stage (1911; reprint, New York: Benjamin Blom, 1969), 1:175.
6. Quoted in Henry Tyrrell, "Jacob Adler--The Bowery Garrick," Theatre 2 (Nov. 1902), 19.
7. Ibid.
8. "Mr. Adler's Shylock," Jewish Exponent, 15 May 1903.
9. Ibid.
10. "Mr. Adler Scores in Shylock Role," New York Herald, 15 May 1905.
11. L., "The True Shakespeare's Jew," American Hebrew, 15 May 1903.
12. "Plays and Players," Globe and Commercial Advertiser, 16 May 1905.
13. Bernard Gorin, "The Yiddish Theatre in New York," Theatre 2 (Jan. 1902), 18.
14. Louis Lipsky, "Acting and Jacob P. Adler," Jewish Exponent, 8 May 1903.
15. "Plays and Players," Globe and Commercial Advertiser, 16 May 1905.
16. "The Yiddish Shylock," New York Times, 26 May 1903.
17. A review in the American Hebrew on 8 May 1903 claimed that Adler performed in the Bovshover translation, but descriptions provided by other reviews indicate that this could have been the case only if Bovshover's text was cut significantly. However, numerous cuts and stage directions in the typescript in the Jacob Adler Papers in the YIVO Archives precisely match the descriptions given in the reviews; this typescript was undoubtedly the text used for Adler's productions.
18. "Mr. Adler's Shylock," Jewish Exponent, 15 May 1903.

19. Shylock, anonymous typescript, Jacob Adler Papers, YIVO Archives, 9. Subsequent quotations from this script will be cited in the text.
20. "Plays and Players," Globe and Commercial Advertiser, 16 May 1905.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Quoted in Tyrrell, 19.
24. L., "The True Shakespeare's Jew," American Hebrew, 15 May 1903.
25. Ibid.
26. Morris Vintshevski, "Shylock, a idisher id," Forverts, 28 Dec. 1901.
27. Lipsky, "Acting and Jacob P. Adler."
28. "Mr. Adler's Shylock," Jewish Exponent, 15 May 1903.
29. "Mr. Adler Scores in Shylock Role," New York Herald, 15 May 1905.
30. Moyshe Katz, "Shylock's tip revolutsyonirt," Di idishe velt, 28 May 1903.
31. "Shylock der id," Di yidishe gazeten, 15 May 1903.
32. Alexander Harkavy, "Iz yidish a shprakh fir drame?" Di fraye yidishe folksbine 1 (1897), 17. For further discussion of this essay, see Chapter 1.
33. "Der nayer Shylock," Di yidishe gazeten, 29 May 1903.
34. John Gross, Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 240.
35. Hermann Sinsheimer, Shylock: The History of a Character (1947; reprint New York: Benjamin Blom, 1963), 142.
36. Der groyser kundes 3 (19 May 1911), 5.
37. For more on Morrison's career, see Chapter 1.
38. Accounts of Schildkraut's Shylock differ as to whether he spoke German or Yiddish when he performed the role in Yiddish theatres. Schildkraut's son Joseph claims that whenever his father played Shylock in a Yiddish theatre, he performed in German with the

supporting cast playing in Yiddish. Zalmen Zylbercweig, on the other hand, writes that Schildkraut first performed the role in German but later played it in Yiddish. A notice anticipating the 1920 production supports the latter claim: "This week, for the first time in the history of the Yiddish theatre, [The Merchant of Venice] will be produced with all the acts and scenes as Shakespeare wrote them, in a good Yiddish translation." See Joseph Schildkraut, My Father and I (New York: Viking Press, 1959), 121; Zalmen Zylbercweig, "Shekspir in yidish un af der yidisher bine," in Hundert yor yidish teater, ed. Charles Klinger (London: Jewish Cultural Society, 1962), 31.

39. "Vos tut zikh in teater?" Yidishes tageblat, 17 March 1911.
40. "Erev peysakh vokh in idishn teater," Di varhayt, 18 March 1911.
41. "Schildkraut als Shylock," Yidishes tageblat, 26 March 1911.
42. Joel Entin, "Dos teater," Di tsukunft 16 (Oct. 1911), 584.
43. Ibid.
44. "Irving Place--The Merchant of Venice," New York Mirror, 29 March 1911.
45. D. C., "In teater," Di fraye arbeter shtime, 20 May 1911.
46. Leon Kobrin, "Schildkraut in Shylock," Der idisher kemfer, 7 April 1911.
47. Jacob Milkh, "Gedanken iber Shylock," Di tsukunft 16 (Oct. 1911), 546.
48. Ibid.
49. A. Epstein, "'Shylock' in nayem idishn teater," Di varhayt, 18 March 1911.
50. Kobrin, "Schildkraut in Shylock."
51. New York Mirror, 29 March 1911.
52. Quoted in Stephen Rathbun, "New Apollo Theatre, Mary Nash and Ben Ami Start Their Season Next Week," New York Sun, 13 Nov. 1920.
53. D. C., "In teater," Di fraye arbeter shtime, 20 May 1911.
54. B. Gorin, "Schildkraut als Shylock," Der morgen zhurnal, 17 Nov. 1920.
55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. "Schwartz First Did Shylock Under Williamsburg Bridge," New York Herald Tribune, 20 April 1930, VIII, 5.

58. David Dank, Shvarts af vays (New York, 1963), 28.

59. Maurice Schwartz, "Shylock in Vaudeville," Der tog English supplement, 27 April 1930.

60. Ibid.

61. "Vaudeville," New York World, 20 April 1930.

62. John Chapman, "Maurice Schwartz Plays Shylock for Palace Fans," New York Daily News, 22 April 1930.

63. "Maurice Schwartz a Fervid Shylock," New York Times, 21 April 1930.

64. Abraham Cahan, "Maurice Schwartz hot groysn erfolg af der amerikaner vaudeville stage," Forverts, 25 April 1930.

65. Zalmen Zylbercweig, "Maurice Schwartz zogt 'Shylocks tokhter hot groyse idish-natsyonale misye,'" Der morgen zhurnal, 25 July 1947.

66. "The Yiddish Shylock," New York Times, 26 May 1903.

67. Gorin, "Schildkraut als Shylock."

68. Richard Watts, Jr., "Yiddish Art Company Offers Shylock Play," New York Post, 7 Oct. 1947.

69. N. Buchwald, "'Shylock un zayn tokhter' in idishn kunst-teater," Morgen frayhayt, 10 Oct. 1947.

70. Gross, Shylock, 336.

71. Theatre program, Shylock un zayn tokhter, Israel Theatre Archive, Tel Aviv University.

72. William Edlin, "'Shylock un zayn tokhter' efent sezon fun kunst teater," Der tog, 3 Oct. 1947.

73. Joel Entin, "Der alter Shylock af a nayem unterschlag," Der idisher kemfer, 24 Oct. 1947.

74. C. Gutman, "'Shylock un zayn tokhter' in idishn kunst teater," Der morgen zhurnal, 3 Oct. 1947.

75. Richard A. Yaffe, "'Shylock and Daughter' Sets Record Straight," P. M., 6 Oct. 1947.
76. David Lifson, The Yiddish Theatre in America (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1965), 384. The owner of this wisecrack was Amos Hirshbein, son of acclaimed Yiddish playwright Peretz Hirshbein.
77. Brooks Atkinson, "On Second Avenue," New York Times, 30 Nov. 1947, II, 1.
78. Jeanette Wilken, "Schwartz an Authentic New 'Shylock,'" New York Daily News, 1 Oct. 1947.
79. Yaffe, "'Shylock and Daughter' Sets Record Straight."
80. Buchwald, "'Shylock un zayn tokhter.'"
81. Entin, "Der alter Shylock."
82. Gutman, "'Shylock un zayn tokhter.'"
83. Buchwald, "'Shylock un zayn tokhter.'" In his introduction to the English translation by Abraham Regelson (New York: Yiddish Art Theatre, 1947), Ibn Zahav himself noted the parallel between the Nuremberg laws and the anti-Jewish edicts in effect in medieval Venice.
84. Quoted in Zylbercweig, "Maurice Schwartz zagt."
85. Quoted in Lifson, 320.

CHAPTER 7

FADING OUT

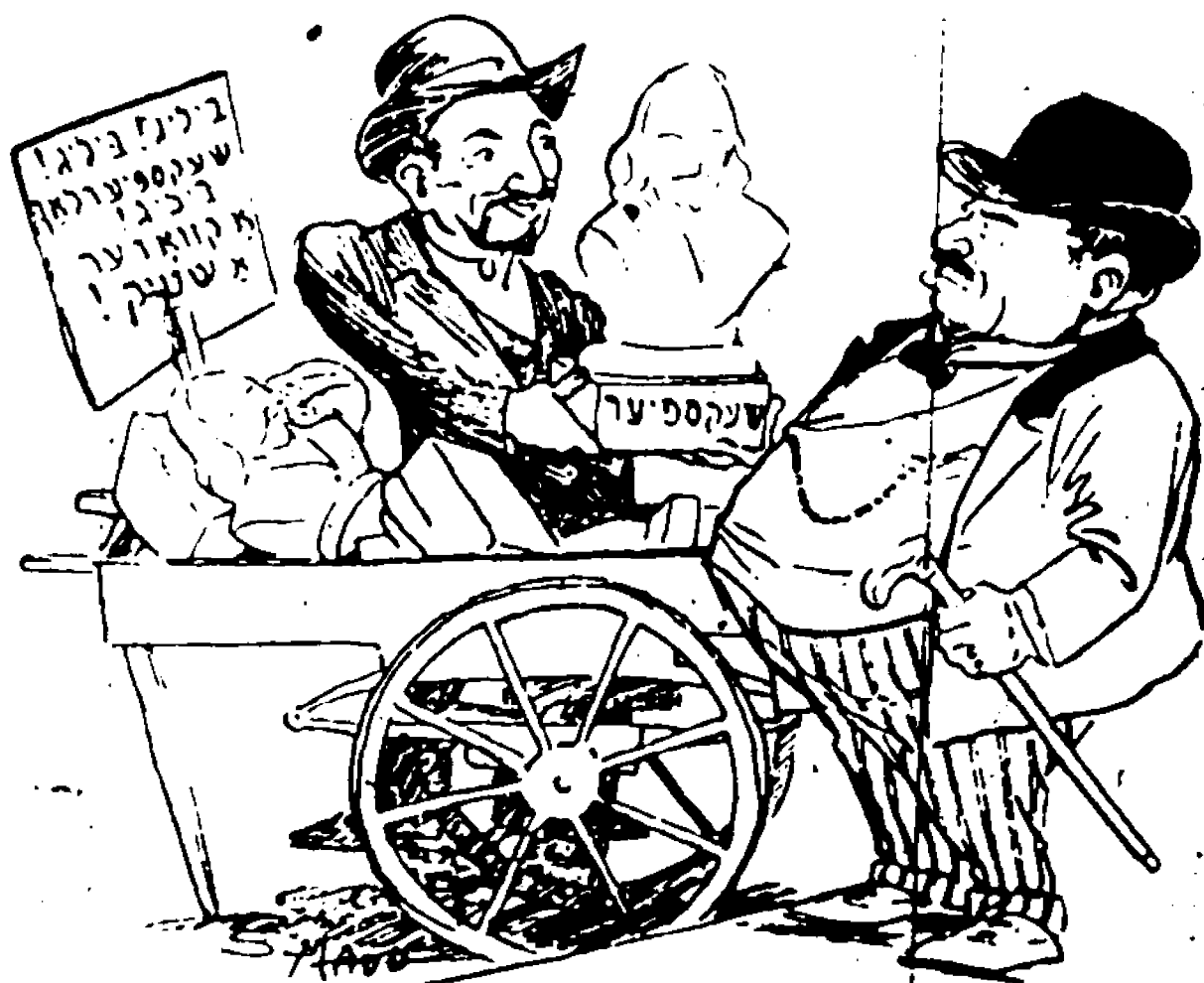
As the world commemorated the tercentenary of Shakespeare's death in April 1916, Yiddish-speaking American Jews took note as well. The Yiddish press ran numerous articles on the playwright's life and times, highlights of the plays' production histories, and even Shakespeare's place in Yiddish culture. That such an observance could be marked so prominently in the Yiddish press rested on two crucial assumptions: the Yiddish theatre had found a place, however precarious, in world theatre, and Shakespeare had found a place, however curious, in the Yiddish theatre.

The American Yiddish audience was changing rapidly, however, and what they expected from Shakespeare was changing as well. Critical reactions to Maurice Schwartz's only non-Judaized production of a Shakespeare play, a 1929 staging of Othello, illustrate the nature of many of these changes, as does the gradual diminution of Shakespearean Yiddish production in the United States during the twentieth century. By April 1964, the quadricentennial of Shakespeare's birth, both the Yiddish theatre and Shakespeare's place in it would change so radically as to make the events of the previous Shakespeare festivities seem two centuries rather than two generations away. Between the two anniversaries, only a few scattered additions to the American Yiddish Shakespeare phenomenon would appear.¹

Most of the Yiddish commentaries on Shakespeare published in the spring of 1916 paralleled similar writings in the English-language press--an indication of the extent to which American Yiddish speakers had embraced the playwright. Yiddish readers could ponder the same sorts of historical, literary, and cultural matters raised by Shakespeare and his work as their English-speaking neighbors.

While serious assessments of Shakespeare's life and work that appeared in Yiddish newspapers and journals in the spring of 1916 tended to be derivative, Yiddish satirists found more interesting ways to capture Yiddish-speakers' contact with a Gentile cultural icon. The socialist Forverts used Shakespeare's iconic status to expose the Philistinism of factory bosses. In a cartoon entitled, "The Best Shakespeare in the Market" (Fig. 5), a peddler smiles from behind a pushcart loaded with busts and bearing a sign that reads, "Cheap! Cheap! Shakespeares cheap! A quarter apiece!" Holding out a sample of his wares to an obese, scowling, well-dressed boss--and a parvenu to boot, we are told--the peddler encourages him to buy "the best Shakespeare in the market." The boss snarls, "Shakespeare? Shakespeare? Who is he, this Shakespeare? Must be that Kaleh Mox, ha?" When the peddler assures him that Shakespeare is not Karl Marx, the boss concludes, "In that case, they can both go to hell. . . . They should both be shipped out of America, those miligants, those anchorists, those radicanals!"² The capitalist's butchery of

דער בעסטער שעקספיער אין מארקעט.



פערלעך: — וויסן איר נאך וואס
 האט איר נאך איר אנדערע
 נאך: — איר איר נאך איר נאך
 דע איר דע דע דע דע דע דע דע
 דע דע דע דע דע דע דע דע
 א דע דע דע דע דע דע דע דע
 דע דע דע דע דע דע דע דע
 דע דע דע דע דע דע דע דע
 דע דע דע דע דע דע דע דע
 דע דע דע דע דע דע דע דע

פערלעך (צו א נאך אן אומבאקאנטן):
 אונטער, קיינעם א דעקעט פאר איר דעקעט-
 פאר איר אונטערדעקעט איר אן אונטערדעקעט
 א קונדע א דעקעט, דאס איר דע דע דע דע
 דע דע דע דע דע דע דע דע
 נאך: — דע דע דע דע דע דע דע דע
 דע דע דע דע דע דע דע דע
 דע דע דע דע דע דע דע דע
 דע דע דע דע דע דע דע דע

Fig. 5

the English language, as well as his ignorance of both Shakespeare and Marx, show his unfitness for coping with anything that falls outside the narrow sphere of his shop.

While the Forverts used Shakespeare's image to critique capitalism, another periodical with a less specific political ideology saw fit to examine broader implications of American Yiddish culture's celebration of Shakespeare. The cover of the satirical journal Der groyser kundes on 21 April 1916 announces one of the edition's themes in a drawing entitled, "Shakespeare and Peretz" (Fig. 6). Isaac Leib Peretz, one of the founding and towering figures of Yiddish literature, died on 3 April 1915, and the Kundes saw fit, as it marked the first anniversary of Peretz's death and the three hundredth of Shakespeare's, to compare the status of both the writers and the literatures they represented.

The cover drawing shows two women seated in a pastoral setting, each sadly holding open a thick book as she looks up at her counterpart. World Literature, the woman on the left, has her book open to a picture of William Shakespeare. The other woman, Yiddish Literature, has her book open to a picture of Peretz, of whom she says, "My poet is not as great as yours, but my loss is much greater."³ After Shakespeare, English could still lay claim to Jonson, Johnson, Byron, and so on; when Yiddish, with a much smaller body of literature to its credit, loses a writer of Peretz's status, it reels from the blow.



Fig. 6

A sort of sequel to the cover illustration appears inside, where a cartoon bearing the heading "In Paradise" (Fig. 7) shows the two winged writers chatting on the clouds. The contemporary flood of Yiddish articles on Shakespeare prompts Peretz to ask, "How is it that the Yiddish newspapers publish special Shakespeare editions while when it comes to me, they are practically silent?" Shakespeare answers sagely, "Well, people have written entire libraries about me, from which one can easily put together a 'special' article, but in your case, one would have to write the article oneself."⁴ According to Shakespeare himself, the disproportionate amount of attention the Yiddish press has paid to Shakespeare says little about the writers' comparative merit.

Yet a third cartoon in the same issue elaborates on ironies brought about by the juxtaposition of Shakespeare and Yiddish culture. "If Shakespeare Had to Sell a Play Today" (Fig. 8) traces the playwright's fruitless attempt to sell his latest play to a Yiddish theatre. Jacob Adler, David Kessler, Boris Thomashefsky, and Bessie Thomashefsky all turn him away, each finding that his play lacks some key ingredient, be it artistry, "punch," "national fervor," or some undefined quality found in Gordin's dramas. The cartoon implies that the Yiddish theatre would find ways to reject even the greatest dramas of all time to make room for the pap that constitutes its customary fare.

The issue's final tribute to Shakespeare comes in the



פון איר זעכסענע נים, פאן זעכסענע, איר פון א איינציקע זעכסענע און
 איר א נידעריקער, פון יין טאטע פון, ערלעכערס פון, וואס זענען איר זעכסענע
 אירע זעכסענע אירע זעכסענע זעכסענע זעכסענע זעכסענע און איר זעכסענע און
 זעכסענע
 זעכסענע: וועל, וועל, איר זעכסענע איר זעכסענע איר זעכסענע איר זעכסענע
 איר זעכסענע איר זעכסענע איר זעכסענע איר זעכסענע איר זעכסענע איר זעכסענע
 איר זעכסענע איר זעכסענע איר זעכסענע איר זעכסענע איר זעכסענע איר זעכסענע

Fig. 7

[illegible]

Fig. 8

form of an imagined interview with the playwright by Isaac Reiss, better known to his readers as Moyshe Nadir.⁵ Nadir, a longtime editor of the Kundes, imagines himself approaching Shakespeare's grave, "à la Zolatarevsky's 'Yeshiva Boy,'" and convincing him to rise out of his tomb for an interview. In Nadir's vision, Shakespeare comes across as bemused by the extent of his fame and amazed that the world makes such a fuss over such lines as "To be or not to be" and "What fools these mortals be!" "Every tailor," he remarks, "has at some point in his life come up with similar words of wisdom."⁶

Besides finding humor in irreverence toward cherished institutions, Nadir pokes fun at the contemporary theatre by having Shakespeare ask, improbably, whether he might be able to write for the Yiddish theatre. "You have already tried that more than once, but you were not a success," Nadir replies. When Shakespeare wonders aloud how he might change this, Nadir offers a rambling recipe for a successful Yiddish play:

. . . with some kind of girl, you understand; and with bastards; and someone should say kaddish in the third act; and some pale wife, you understand, should carry "the fruit of her love under her heart" and should sing a little duet with the comedian . . . and in the last act the lover should fall back in love with his beloved and the music should come in with a happy melody, and it should thunder and snow and a torrential rain should fall, and two suns with five giant moons should shine through the window, and--⁷

But Shakespeare has had enough, and returns to his grave.

Jacob Gordin had satirized similar characteristics of the Yiddish theatre in the early 1890s, and drew upon Shakespeare

in his campaign to reform the theatre. Gordin's effort to familiarize his audience with Shakespeare clearly bore fruit, as did his attempt to bring the well-made play to that audience. However, as far as Gordin and his fellow reformers were concerned, such successes were incomplete; Gordinesque dramas managed to coexist with the melodramas and historical operas of the earlier Yiddish theatre, but as Nadir's description illustrates, they did not manage to expel the old forms from the stage.

Shakespeare's plays managed to coexist with those of Gordin, Goldfaden, Lateiner, and Hurwitz; indeed, by 1916 he had become an honorary member of the first generation of Yiddish playwrights. However, while several Shakespearean translations and adaptations remained popular in revival (contrary to Nadir's contention that Shakespeare was "not a success"), the teens brought the beginning of the end for new American Yiddish interpretations of Shakespeare. From that decade on, Yiddish theatre companies no longer competed with each other to produce Shakespeare's plays; the last holdout was Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre.

The Yiddish Art Theatre presented three Shakespearean premieres during its three decades of activity, but the theatre's production of Othello in 1929 was its only treatment of Shakespeare qua Shakespeare, or in other words, of non-Judaized Shakespeare.⁸ At first glance, the Yiddish Art Theatre might seem an ideal agent for bringing Shakespeare to

Yiddish audiences. Maurice Schwartz, its director, had studied the classics and performed with most of the major Yiddish interpreters of Shakespeare. Furthermore, he sought to raise the artistic level of the Yiddish theatre repertoire. The latter aim, in fact, partly explains the scarcity of Shakespeare plays among the more than 130 different productions the company mounted. One of the Yiddish Art Theatre's most important achievements was its contribution to an indigenous Yiddish drama; in addition to reviving classics by Gordin, Kobrin, Sholom Aleichem, and others, it helped launch the careers of a new generation of playwrights, such as H. Leivick, Peretz Hirshbein, and David Pinski. The American Yiddish drama was strongest when it relied on Shakespeare least.

Yet even when the reserve of talented Yiddish playwrights was richest, the Yiddish theatre did not entirely turn its back on the Gentile playwright who had provided it with so much source material. The staples of the Yiddish Shakespeare repertory, such as Hamlet, Gordin's Lear variations, and Zolatarevsky's Yeshiva Boy, enjoyed continued revivals, and on 31 January 1929, at a benefit performance for Maurice Schwartz, the Yiddish Art Theatre presented a new translation of Othello. The translator, Mark Schweid, had already made a name for himself as an actor and poet, and signs of his ability emerge at numerous points in the text.

Schweid's translation, more than any extant text that had

been produced in the United States before it, carefully follows Shakespeare's rhyme scheme; Schweid not only shifts from prose to verse whenever Shakespeare does, but even tries to find a Yiddish approximation for Shakespeare's rhymes. Take, for example, the Duke's comments following the reconciliation of Othello and his new father-in-law, Brabantio:

What cannot be preserv'd when Fortune takes,
 Patience her injury a mockery makes.
 The robb'd that smiles steals something from the thief;
 He robs himself that spends a bootless grief. [I.iii.206-209]

Schweid renders the Yiddish as follows:

Vos s'lozt zikh nit farhitn, loz dem falshn glik
 Un far zayn krenkung gib im mit geduld tsurik.
 Baroybst dem royber, ven a shmeykhldig baroybter bizt,
 Der ganvet bloyz bay zikh, ver s'paynigt zikh umzist.⁶

Schweid conveys the meaning of the passage as he creates a rhyme scheme parallel to the pattern of the original, but in doing so, he makes the verse difficult for the actors to speak. Where Shakespeare delivers the rhyme in elegant iambic pentameter, Schweid's rhymes come in Alexandrine form, with the third line above stretching to a fourteen-syllable gallop that might easily turn the Duke a royal purple. Such passages led critic Nakhum Buchwald to conclude, "The translation loses almost all of the magic of Shakespeare's poetry . . . What [Schweid] has given us in Yiddish is very nice, but it is not Shakespeare."¹⁰

Buchwald's critique of the text itself placed him in the minority, for the other Yiddish critics tended to praise

Schweid's work, albeit without specifying why. Both viewpoints have some merit; Buchwald correctly recognized that Schweid failed to make Shakespeare's poetry soar, but perhaps what Schweid's champions admired were both his careful attention to, and clear understanding of, the original. At least the fragment of the text that survives--about two-thirds of the play--follows the original in both the meaning of the lines and the arrangement of the scenes more than was customary in the American Yiddish theatre.

Nevertheless, the production called attention to its own experimental endeavors. The play's director, Soviet-trained Boris Glagolin, offered a sharply stylized production whose "modernistic" set impressed New York Sun critic Stephen Rathbun:

There are tall columns, some painted orange, others painted black, and in one scene there is a banquet table placed at such an extreme slant that if it were aboard a ship no soup would be served until the storm had abated. These settings . . . were like a blending of the Russian style with a touch of the Norman Bel-Geddes magic.¹¹

Not everyone admired the production's modernistic trappings, however. While Nakhum Buchwald also recognized that the director "has adorned the play with outward spectacle," he added sourly: "But it is not an interesting spectacle."¹²

One part of the spectacle did manage to attract most of the critics' interest, if not their approval. In place of the orchestra pit, Glagolin had a tank of water built that could serve as a Venetian canal in Act I and the Cyprus harbor afterward. However, the proximity of the story's setting to

bodies of water did not suffice to convince the critics that such spectacle served the play, and Glagolin's direction did little to help integrate the water into the action. The only direct use he made of the water was to bring Iago and Roderigo onstage in a gondola at the beginning, and for a little girl to play with a ball that rolled into the water later in the play. The critics found these to be flimsy pretexts for building the water tank, on which they heaped their sarcasm; Cahan continually referred to it as a bathtub and Rathbun suggested, "All that was needed was some fish to make it the most popular feature of the production."¹³ Buchwald reminded his readers that the set of the 1924 Yiddish Art Theatre production of Peretz Hirshbein's Ghosts Know What, also included "several thousand gallons of real water. And just as we did not understand at the time why there needed to be real water in a play, we do not understand now either--unless it is to make fools marvel."¹⁴

Glagolin undoubtedly had nobler artistic motives for using the water than the one Buchwald ascribed to him, though it is understandable that critics at the time saw it as gratuitous. In retrospect, it seems that the director intended it not just as spectacle in and of itself (for it was that, first and foremost), but also as a means of underscoring the play's Mediterranean flavor, in both its setting and its source. This would have been consistent with other production choices, for Glagolin drew on the commedia dell'arte to make

Othello's servant, the Clown, into a harlequin and Cassio's mistress, Bianca, into a columbine. The play's Italian setting may not have been the only impetus for using commedia elements; Glagolin's former countryman, Vsevolod Meyerhold, began experimenting with such techniques in the early 1900s, and inspired other directors to do the same.

Glagolin also brought the role of Iago more in line with Shakespeare's source for Othello, a novella by Italian Renaissance writer Giambattista Giraldi Cinthio. As the New York Times reviewer observed, "The Iago of Glagolin and of Giraldi Cinthio is a despised and rejected suitor of Desdemona, whose sick passion for the Moor's white lady is in the acting of Maurice Schwartz persistently in evidence."¹⁵ One bit of "evidence" in that direction, remarked upon by two different reviewers, was Schwartz's Iago picking up the shawl Desdemona dropped and clasping it to his breast.¹⁶

Such moments added up to what the New York Times critic saw as "a new Iago": "As Mr. Schwartz plays the part and in the costume he wears there is a deal more Mephistopheles in the character than there is of Iago." Forverts editor Abraham Cahan also found a different Iago than he had expected, but felt that the production suggested motivations other than diabolism for Iago's treachery:

Glagolin has turned Iago into a sort of psychopath, a sick man with not-too-healthy nerves . . . a dark demon in human form, a patient from a sanitarium. That is how Maurice Schwartz plays Iago, and if you forget about Shakespeare's Iago, he plays him very well.¹⁷

Cahan concluded that Schwartz's interpretation led him almost to pity Iago. One certainly would have to "forget about Shakespeare's Iago" to appreciate such a response to the character who so coldly schemes to bring about so much destruction.

Schwartz led the rest of the cast in a broad, declamatory style of acting; in Cahan's words, "Just as they declaim with their voices, they also declaim with their feet and hands."¹⁸ Cahan took care to point out that such stylized acting could be worthwhile, and reminded his readers that the greatest Yiddish actors of the previous generation, such as David Kessler and Sara Adler, tended to perform with grand gestures as well. Cahan praised the performances, especially those of Schwartz, Ben-Zvi Baratoff as Othello, and Celia Adler as Desdemona. Nakhum Buchwald was not as receptive as Cahan to the potential merits of a broad acting style, concluding that Schwartz's Iago "sometimes descended to the level of an operatic villain."¹⁹ However, Buchwald found that one quality in Schwartz's acting kept his performance from being a total failure: "He made a strong impression at certain moments from suspenseful silences, from dramatic stillnesses."²⁰

Buchwald was not the only critic who would have liked Schwartz to tone down his performance, for even those who praised the actor's interpretation tended to agree with Cahan that Schwartz "shouts too much."²¹ Another critic, B. Y.

Goldstein, concurred: "If that man does not lose his voice by the end of the play's five-week run, it will be a miracle."²² Since the production closed after just two weeks, Schwartz's voice was saved.

The Yiddish Art Theatre's Othello was far from the first American Yiddish version of Shakespeare to disappoint both audiences and reviewers. Nevertheless, Glagolin's production moved several Yiddish critics to ask, as Abraham Cahan bluntly put it, "Should we perform Shakespeare in Yiddish at all?"²³ At first glance, the question seems anachronistic, given the tradition of some forty years of Yiddish Shakespeare in the United States. The same issue had appeared in print before, but the critical successes of such stars as Bertha Kalish and Jacob Adler seemed to put it to rest. However, the resuscitation of the question in 1929 suggests that critics saw Glagolin's Othello as separate from that tradition in ways that demanded the issue to be raised anew.

Echoes of Cahan's question by other Yiddish critics who reviewed Glagolin's Othello indicate that those critics now demanded something more of Shakespeare in Yiddish than mere faithfulness to the text, or even a "mere" outstanding star performance. One aspect of the production's approach to the original that annoyed some of the Yiddish critics was its self-consciously experimental approach. Cahan sarcastically remarked,

When Americans or Englishmen, Germans or Frenchmen go to see a Shakespeare play, they want to see Shakespeare's

play itself. Our Yiddish theatre audience, however, has evolved much further than the Americans, English, Germans, and French--or so Mr. Glagolin and Maurice Schwartz have decided. For Jews, one cannot present Shakespearean Shakespeare. His Othello has to be cut up and presented anew.²⁴

Alexander Mukdoiny echoed Cahan's sentiment, complaining that "Germans, Englishmen, and Frenchmen find it suitable to give traditional Shakespeare productions, but we Jews want to give modernistic Shakespeare productions."²⁵ This generalization was hardly warranted by the example of just one production, but shows that at least for some critics, the American Yiddish theatre had not yet produced enough "Shakespearean Shakespeare" to support such unabashedly experimental efforts.

Cahan did not specify what constituted a "Shakespearean" production of Shakespeare, but another reviewer offered a more specific suggestion for a way to improve the production. Like Cahan and Mukdoiny, B. Y. Goldstein of the Frave arbeter shtime disliked the production's modernistic approach; unlike his colleagues, though, he noticed the promise of a richer, more interesting work below the production's surface. He related what he saw to the Yiddish Art Theatre's recent revival of God, Man, and Devil, Jacob Gordin's take on the Faust legend. Schwartz had played the Mephistophelean Uriel Mazik, who dons traditional Jewish clothing to lead astray the pious protagonist of Gordin's play, and Celia Adler played Freydenyu, a niece of the Faust figure:

Maurice Schwartz very successfully transformed Iago into Uriel Mazik. . . . When he neither Urieled nor Maziked, he failed. Celia Adler be-Freydenyued Desdemona so

beautifully, and whenever she recalled that she was playing not Freydenyu, but a Shakespearean heroine . . . she failed. M. B. Samuelovitsh played a "good Jew," a rabbi, a community leader, not a Venetian Doge. . . . If they had not translated Othello, but simply Judaized it, we would have had a fine production.²⁶

Goldstein had history on his side; American Yiddish audiences embraced Shakespeare most warmly when his plays were reconfigured to suit a Jewish idiom. Perhaps Schwartz and Glagolin missed a golden opportunity to present an Othello with a Jewish flavor, if not an extensively Judaized version of the play.

Goldstein's suggestion notwithstanding, other critics questioned whether it was worthwhile to translate Shakespeare into Yiddish at all. Nakhum Buchwald proposed a rigid test for answering that question: "If one cannot translate Shakespeare so that along with correct meaning and poetic meter, there comes across at least something of the original poetic language, then one should not translate Shakespeare at all."²⁷ Buchwald's criteria reflect an entirely different approach to Shakespeare's plays from the way the early Yiddish theatre viewed them. His requirements would have been absurd in the 1890s, when Yiddish adaptors treated Shakespeare's plays as little more than vehicles for generating new plots and characters.

Another sign of the American Yiddish drama's progress as of 1929 was that it had a number of talented playwrights providing it with new works which spoke in a Jewish idiom from their inception; these plays all but precluded new adaptations

of Shakespeare. Except for the short-lived Legend of the Yiddish King Lear in 1932, the Yiddish Art Theatre would return to Shakespeare only once more, in the adapted form of the 1947 Shylock and His Daughter. There is no record of any other Yiddish Shakespearean theatrical premieres in the United States after 1930.

New treatments of Shakespeare in Yiddish emerged periodically in the 1940s and 1950s, but in print rather than in production. The mid-1940s was a particularly fruitful period for such work. Avrom Asen, who previously published Yiddish translations of poetry by Byron, Longfellow, and Whitman, among others, published his translations of the sonnets in 1944 and of King Lear in 1947. The 1940s also witnessed the only book-length biography of Shakespeare in Yiddish: Avrom Teitelbaum's William Shakespeare (1946). In his introduction to the book, Teitelbaum explicitly disavowed any attempt at original scholarship:

I have simply attempted to give in my work enough biographical material, gathered from both old and new sources, for the Yiddish reader . . . to form a basic impression about William Shakespeare, his life, his epoch, most of his works, and the theatre where he spent his best years.²⁸

One wonders which Yiddish readers Teitelbaum had in mind, for most American Jews in 1946 would have had no trouble reading such information in English. However, Teitelbaum also notes in the introduction that "the richness of a language and the importance of its literature are assessed by its important translations of the Bible and of the works of William

Shakespeare."²⁹ Teitelbaum's biography of Shakespeare filled what he perceived as a gap in the treatment of the playwright in Yiddish, and thus addressed itself not so much to specific Yiddish readers as to the Yiddish language as a whole.

Whatever they may have added to the aggregate of Yiddish treatments of Shakespeare's life and work, the literary efforts of Asen and Teitelbaum fit into a larger reaction that historian Howard Sachar calls a "last spasm of defiance" against the acculturation of American Jews.³⁰ The Yiddish Art Theatre also defied that trend for a remarkably long time, but finally closed its doors for good in 1950. The Yiddish language had become a shrinking vestige, at least for the time being, in the collective consciousness of America's Jews.

Where Yiddish did hold on, it seldom concerned itself with Shakespeare. Where the energetic Yiddish press marked the tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth in 1916 with wit and vigor, the moribund Yiddish press of 1964 paid little or no attention to the quadricentennial of his birth. However, a review of Hamlet--on Broadway, starring Richard Burton--printed in the Forverts on 24 April 1964, the day after the official observance of Shakespeare's birthday, illustrates how thoroughly Yiddish culture's assumptions about Shakespeare's cultural significance had changed between the two anniversaries:

The truth is that 'Hamlet' today is almost entirely literature. The play becomes less and less interesting as theatre--first of all, because everyone already knows the story of the Danish prince and no more surprises can

be expected of him in the theatre, and second, because 'Hamlet' is throughout a philosophical drama. If you are not interested in philosophy, there is nothing left for you in the production.³¹

Was this the same play for whose author Yiddish theatregoers shouted after they first saw Hamlet in 1893? Yes and no. Hamlet itself had not changed, of course. What had changed were the American Yiddish audience's underlying assumptions about Shakespeare, about America, and about Yiddish language and culture--the constant state of flux that so enlivened the history of Shakespeare on the American Yiddish stage.

NOTES

1. That is, in addition to the Yiddish versions of The Merchant of Venice treated in Chapter 6.
2. "Der bester Shekspir in mark," Forverts, 30 April 1916.
3. Der groyser kundes 8 (21 April 1916), 1.
4. Ibid., 6.
5. The pseudonym, pronounced "na-deer" and not to be confused with the English word "nadir," means something along the lines of "here, take this."
6. Der groyser kundes 8 (21 April 1916), 5.
7. Ibid., 10.
8. Schwartz staged revivals of Gordin's Jewish King Lear and Mirele Efros on 17 January 1919 and 1 February 1919 respectively. He also wrote (under the pseudonym M. Charnoff) and starred in a play called Shakespeare un company [Shakespeare and Company], which premiered at the Nora Bayes Theatre on 19 October 1925. The title is deceiving, however. The pseudo-Pirandellian situation comedy follows the results of a businessman's decision to write a play about a love triangle and to insist that his wife, a retired actress, play the part of the wife opposite her former real-life paramour. The husband, of course, gets extremely jealous, and ultimately resolves never to attempt playwriting again. Shakespeare's name in the title sets up a play on the word "company" in its dual meanings as theatre troupe and business, but the play's content has nothing to do with Shakespeare. The Yiddish Art Theatre staged one other Judaized adaptation of Shakespeare (besides Shylock and His Daughter, discussed in Chapter 6): Di legende fun yidishn kenig Lir [The Legend of the Jewish King Lear], about a troupe of actors performing Gordin's play, premiered on 30 November 1932, but ran for only one weekend. Unfortunately, any further information about this play has been impossible to find. No newspaper seems to have reviewed it, since the play was staged in the middle of the run of Schwartz's dramatization of I. J. Singer's novel Yoshe Kalb, the Yiddish Art Theatre's most commercially successful production ever, which ran for almost the entire season.
9. William Shakespeare, Othello, trans. Mark Schweid, 14. Maurice Schwartz Papers, YIVO Archives. The typescript is incomplete, lacking a title page and going only up to the middle of Shakespeare's III.iii. However, besides its location in the Maurice Schwartz Papers, other characteristics signal that the script is the Schweid translation. First is the overall quality of

the translation in such matters as following Shakespeare's rhyme and meaning. Second is the script's treatment of Iago; cuts in the character's speeches agree with the critics' interpretation of the character. Finally and most idiosyncratically is the greatly expanded role of the Clown, who is added to a number of scenes in the text, again corresponding to the critics' observations.

10. Nakhum Buchwald, "'Otelo' in idishn kunst teater," Morgen-frayhayt, 7 Feb. 1929.

11. Stephen Rathbun, "In and Out of the Theater," New York Sun, 4 Feb. 1929.

12. N. Buchwald, "'Otelo' in idishn kunst teater."

13. Rathbun, "In and Out of the Theater."

14. Buchwald, "'Otelo' in idishn kunst teater."

15. "Yiddish Art Theatre Gives 'New' Othello," New York Times, 4 Feb. 1929.

16. A. Glants, "Di Shekspir oyffirung in kunst teater," Der tog, 8 Feb. 1929; Stephen Rathbun, "In and Out of the Theater," New York Sun, 4 Feb. 1929.

17. Abraham Cahan, "'Othello' in Shvarts's kunst teater," Forverts, 8 Feb. 1929.

18. Ibid.

19. Buchwald, "'Otelo' in idishn kunst teater."

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. B. Y. Goldstein, "Af der teater avenue," Di fraye arbeter shtime, 15 Feb. 1929.

23. Cahan, "'Othello' in Shvarts's kunst teater."

24. Ibid.

25. Dr. A. Mukdoiny, "Shekspir-oyffirungen," Morgen-zhurnal, 17 Feb. 1929.

26. Goldstein, "Af der teater avenue."

27. Buchwald, "'Otelo' in idishn kunst teater."

28. Avrom Teitelbaum, William Shakespeare (New York: Yidisher Kultur Farband, 1946), 9.

29. Ibid.

30. Howard Sachar, A History of the Jews in America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 377.

31. D. S., "Richard Burton in Shekspir's 'Hamlet'," Forverts, 24 April 1964.

CONCLUSION

EDDIE: English! English! Say it in English for Chrissakes!

GUSTA'S VOICE: You can't say it in English, Eddie, it don't do the job.

--Herb Gardner, Conversations With My Father¹

EDELSHTEIN: If you become a Gentile you don't automatically become a Shakespeare.

OSTROVER: Oho! A lot you know. I'll let you in on the facts, Hershele . . . Now listen--did you ever hear of Velvl Shikkerparev? Never. A Yiddish scribbler writing romances for the Yiddish stage in the East End, I'm speaking of London, England. He finds a translator and overnight he becomes Willie Shakespeare.

--Cynthia Ozick, "Envy; or, Yiddish in America"²

To paraphrase the first question Jews ask at the Passover Seder, what makes Shakespeare different from all other playwrights? What did Shakespeare represent that made Yiddish theatre troupes in the United States perform his plays in the first place, and then continue to perform them to an extent that gave him a unique place among non-Yiddish writers whose works were performed on the American Yiddish stage? The pat responses having to do with Shakespeare's universal genius and understanding of human nature, foisted so energetically upon English speakers in school and beyond, do not suffice here. Shakespeare's unique status in the American Yiddish theatre arose for a complex variety of reasons and yielded a variety of results.

That complexity began to emerge from the first Yiddish productions of Shakespeare. Advertisements promoted them as

"art," as "masterpieces," but also as sheer entertainment. Some companies mounted hastily written Yiddish versions--often adapted in turn from Russian or German translations--in search of a quick profit, while others sought to use Shakespearean sources to educate recent immigrants in the ABC's of the dominant Western cultural tradition. Actors looked to Shakespeare to validate the Yiddish theatre, but also to help them leave that theatre if they got the chance. In short, Shakespeare meant many different things to the American Yiddish theatre--often many things at once.

Shakespeare's plays first entered the Yiddish theatre because there were not enough Yiddish playwrights to go around. A handful of playwrights could supply dramatic material to just two companies, but when a third theatre opened, so did the floodgates of translation. Even then, however, Shakespeare's plays would not have had the chance to make an appreciable impact on the American Yiddish theatre if they did not make a profit at least some of the time, for America's Yiddish theatre managers, like their counterparts elsewhere, had little interest in starving for the sake of art. Although advertisements for the first productions of Shakespeare's plays sought to capitalize on his artistic cachet, it was just one in a list of possible selling points, including the star power of the actors; the dazzle of the production's set, costumes, and effects; and the comfort of the theatre's seats. The bulk of the American Yiddish

audience at the turn of the century, to borrow the words of a Philistine capitalist depicted in a satirical newspaper sketch, would not have known "Shakes-beer" from lager beer.³ Otherwise, some of the earliest Yiddish adaptors of the former, such as Moyshe Zeifert and D. M. Hermalin, might have been pilloried for their efforts.

Box office receipts also dictated which plays remained in the repertoire and which disappeared quickly. American Yiddish theatre companies produced translations and adaptations of ten different Shakespeare plays, five either failing miserably or achieving only modest success, the other five gaining a lasting place in the American Yiddish repertoire. Productions of Macbeth and Julius Caesar in the 1890s disappeared almost immediately, while Coriolanus and Richard III during the same period fared only slightly better. Yiddish audiences of that period were notorious for shunning plays without heroes as the protagonists, so their cool reception to Macbeth and Richard III is easy to understand. Coriolanus and Marc Antony may possess more admirable traits, but they offer little chance for the audience to get sentimental--a key ingredient of non-comic offerings on the Yiddish stage at the time.

The American Yiddish theatre hardly touched Shakespeare's comedies. The Merchant of Venice was staged many times in Yiddish, but the Yiddish theatre always treated Shylock's saga as a tragedy. Otherwise, the only Yiddish production of a

Shakespearean comedy in the United States was The Pretty American (1910), Boris Thomashefsky's musical version of The Taming of the Shrew. Written for Thomashefsky's wife Bessie, the play enjoyed a small measure of success. The Thomashefskys were but one of a number of popular Yiddish husband-and-wife theatrical teams; others included Max and Sophia Karp, Jacob and Sara Adler, and Sigmund and Dina Feinman. All of those couples, however, were most admired for their serious dramatic roles, and the American Yiddish theatre tended to see tragedy as the stuff of art, comedy as popular but less artistic. If one was to go to the trouble of producing Shakespeare, one might as well use the experience to add to one's prestige.

Five plays established Shakespeare's prominence in the American Yiddish theatre: Hamlet, Othello, Romeo and Juliet, King Lear, and The Merchant of Venice. All five were presented in both translations and Judaized adaptations, and in both forms of the first four plays, Yiddish writers tailored their scripts to heighten the sentimentality of love, loss, and the break-up of the family--the central institution in Jewish life, which new immigrants were working so desperately to hold together. As generations passed, the plays' resonance with their first American Yiddish audience changed--a trend discussed further below.

Of the five Shakespeare plays most frequently produced on American Yiddish stages, The Merchant of Venice--Shylock, as

Yiddish audiences usually knew it--stood apart. Because of its explicit treatment of anti-Semitism, the play allowed Yiddish theatre companies to address the issue of Jewish identity in a Christian country more directly than did any other Shakespeare play. Not surprisingly, The Merchant of Venice also inspired more commentary in Yiddish journals and newspapers than any other Shakespeare play, critics finding in it an opportunity to examine anti-Semitism not just in his work, but in literature and society in general. Jewish opinions of the play's message differed widely, but even productions faithful to the English text in other respects were remarkably consistent in one regard: the elimination of Act V. The one Shakespeare play to address Jewish issues was also the one that Yiddish audiences had the least opportunity to enjoy in its original form.

Yiddish adaptors made cuts in all the Shakespeare plays they staged in order to please their audiences and their actors, but from the beginning of his entry into the Yiddish theatre, Shakespeare was seen as more than just another potential source of income. A segment of Yiddish theatre artists who had been active in Russian belles-lettres and politics found ways to educate their audience by translating and adapting Shakespeare into Yiddish. Jacob Gordin's Jewish King Lear most clearly embodies the didactic approach; the play's raisonneur first summarizes King Lear and then repeatedly reminds the title character of his resemblance to

Shakespeare's outcast monarch. Gordin thus contributes to the cultural literacy of his audience while imparting broader ideological messages involving what it means to be a good Jew, a good father, a good daughter--in short, a mentsh.

Potentially valuable as such lessons may have been, Jewish audiences already had their religion to provide them with a general ethical framework. Judaism's ability to help them adapt to their new homeland was not always so apparent, however. Often, in fact, new immigrants found that they had to forego certain religious codes and customs, such as dietary laws, in order to succeed in America. By depicting the most outwardly pious characters as the most destructive, such Shakespearean adaptations as The Jewish King Lear, Zolotarevsky's Yeshiva Boy, and Rakov's Oath on the Torah reassured recent Jewish immigrants to the United States that being a good Jew depended far less on ritual observance than on simple humaneness.

Had Gordin been a mere sermonizer who knew a fertile source of inspiration when he saw one, audiences would have paid little attention to either The Jewish King Lear or its sister drama, Mirele Efros. But he had dramaturgical skills as well: he knew how to develop in dramatic form the social issues that concerned him, write memorable retorts and moving speeches, and give actors the raw materials from which to create vivid characters. Other Yiddish playwrights learned a great deal from him, and periodically revived his innovation

of transplanting a Shakespearean play into a Jewish idiom. In addition to Gordin's two reworkings of the Lear story, Isidore Zolotarevsky's Yeshiva Boy and Leon Kobrin's Blind Musician rounded out a quartet of Judaized adaptations that became lasting components of the Yiddish dramatic repertoire. The playwrights who wrote them made no attempt to render line-by-line translations of King Lear, Hamlet, or Othello, but determined that some broader aspect of their sources merited reworking in order to reach a specific audience. Much of the popularity of these adaptations derived from their ability to relate the original plot and characters to people and situations immediately recognizable to the American Yiddish audience.

Making Shakespeare's plays Jewish made them more accessible to Jews, but keeping the Shakespearean plot and characters essentially intact provided benefits as well. When the Yiddish theatre first began to produce Shakespeare, the reputations of many of the world's most famous actors rested on their achievements as Shakespeareans. Yiddish actors thus hoped to add to their own prestige by calling themselves Shakespeareans as well. From the start, some critics found this notion laughable. Moyshe Zeifert, who made the first adaptation of Hamlet for production in Yiddish and then lampooned the result, characterized the early Yiddish actors' hankering after Shakespeare as a sickness--"Classical Influenza," he called it.⁴ This was Zeifert's way of

caricaturing what he saw as overreaching. Zeifert had good reason to want to burst his contemporaries' bubble. Who were these tyros--these pishers, to use the Yiddish vernacular--to try on the roles created by the most esteemed playwright in the English language? How could they expect to succeed?

The actors not only dared to perform Shakespeare; they made extravagant and often impossible claims about their Shakespearean productions, very much in the spirit of nineteenth-century American theatrical puffery. P. T. Barnum, the master of the inflated advertisement, would probably would have admired the poster claiming that Shakespeare wrote the role of Hamlet especially for Boris Thomashefsky. That poster represented the more outlandish end of the advertising spectrum, but Yiddish ads for Shakespearean productions indulged in subtler forms of puffery all the time, calling one Shakespeare play after another "the greatest masterpiece of all time" and the members of every Yiddish theatre company "the greatest artists in the world." Such claims had a necessarily short shelf life; as American Yiddish audiences gained familiarity with both Shakespeare and the contemporary theatre scene, advertisers had less of an opportunity to bamboozle the public.

Although the inflated advertising rhetoric eventually died down, some Yiddish critics continued to view the production of Shakespeare in Yiddish as nothing more than a gimmick. In a 1909 essay, Zeifert returned to the theme of

Yiddish actors' alleged mangling of Shakespeare:

People who have been brought up on Lateiner's, Hurwitz's, and Shaykevitsh's plays; people who not only have never attended a dramatic school, but have never even had a real drama teacher; people who cannot distinguish between Zolotarevsky and Shakespeare . . . have the chutzpah to appear on the Yiddish stage in Shylock, in Hamlet, in [Hauptmann's] The Sunken Bell, in [Sudermann's] Heimat and the like--plays in which mediocre Gentile actors would never dare to perform. What is the result of such productions? The ordinary theatregoer sleeps soundly through them, and the intelligent theatregoer, who has seen real artists in the same plays, gets appendicitis or nervous dyspepsia from them, and will not come to the theatre a second time.⁵

Zeifert was particularly rough on the Yiddish actors, but other critics would have agreed with the general tenor of his remarks.

The productions often provided skeptics like Zeifert with no shortage of ammunition. The translations tended to fall far short of conveying the poetry, and sometimes even the meaning, of the original texts. Furthermore, many of the translations into Yiddish hardly qualified as Yiddish at all; in order to sound more "literary," playwrights turned Shakespeare's language into daytshmerish, a stuffy middle road between Yiddish and German. Many of the Judaized adaptations suffered from severe dramaturgical flaws of their own, such as unmotivated actions, two-dimensional characters, and abrupt dénouements.

Many of these flaws undoubtedly appear more glaring on the page than they did on the stage, but every textual shortcoming had its onstage counterpart. The same conditions that forced playwrights to turn out hastily written scripts

made actors learn several roles at once; many an awkward moment made the prompter the most important person in the theatre. The stars, however, were the main attractions, and the emphasis on them often came at the expense of the quality of the ensemble; some of the most lauded Shakespearean performances in Yiddish were supported by indifferent acting.

While Zeifert certainly had some justification for his conclusions, a broader view of the productions and a closer look at Zeifert's critical standards paint a more flattering picture of Shakespeare in Yiddish. First of all, the contrasts he draws were much more ambiguous in reality. English-speaking American critics would have taken issue with the observation that "mediocre Gentile actors would never dare to perform" Shakespeare. The Yiddish theatre was by no means alone in producing some laughably bad Shakespearean efforts; it is no accident that two of the nineteenth century's most noted humorists, Charles Dickens and Mark Twain, caricatured hapless productions of Shakespeare's plays in Great Expectations and Huckleberry Finn, respectively.

Zeifert also makes critical judgments while apparently assuming that his readers intuitively know the difference between "ordinary" and "intelligent" theatregoers. Yiddish theatre critics peppered their reviews with similarly pregnant but vague terms: "art," "the better plays," "shund." Such artistic hierarchies focused more on the texts than on the productions, so that a lackluster staging of a Gordin play

would still qualify as one of the "better plays," whereas even a solidly acted Lateiner melodrama that left the audience in tears could not escape the ghund label inevitably placed on any of that playwright's works.

In fact, the more emotionally the audience reacted, the more it aroused the critics' contempt. Yiddish critics described the audiences as beasts, simpletons, and children--creatures who did not know what was good for them. In disregarding the validity of the audience's taste, the Yiddish critics overlooked a great deal of what made the American Yiddish theatre so special. The audience adored its actors, and when it was moved by a play, it got passionately involved with what happened onstage. At performances of Jacob Gordin's Siberia in 1891, women in the audience were said to have thrown their shawls onstage for the shivering inmates of a Siberian prison camp. Yiddish critics made fun of such naiveté, but the fervor of Yiddish audiences impressed outsiders accustomed to more reserved responses. When Jacob Adler performed Shylock, for example, more than one reviewer from the American press marveled at the spectacular reception that met him. As the New York Times reviewer described it,

. . . he made his entrance into the streets of Venice treading upon a path of roses. It is thus that an east side favorite makes his transit, for as Mr. Adler walked on in the first act there was a shower of rose leaves from an upper box which literally covered the stage. At the same moment what seemed to be the best trained clique that New York has yet known made itself heard from all parts of the house.⁶

Critical standards of artistry aside, such receptions counted

as theatrical triumphs for the stars, to whom Yiddish audiences remained faithful to them even when the actors performed outside the Yiddish theatre.

The nay-sayers who looked down upon unsophisticated audiences did not give the actors enough credit either, and usually overlooked how far the Yiddish theatre had come in such a short time. The actors who first performed Shakespeare in Yiddish belonged to the first generation of professional Yiddish actors. They had neither formal training nor mentors who spoke their mother tongue, but within a decade, the best of them would begin to attract favorable comparisons to some of the most celebrated Shakespeareans of their day. Critics from the English-language press as well as from the Yiddish press would compare Bertha Kalish's Hamlet to that of Sarah Bernhardt and Jacob Adler's Shylock to Henry Irving's. In such cases, Shakespeare gave the Yiddish actors exactly what they wanted from him: a mark of legitimacy and a means of measuring their talents against those of their colleagues who performed in English, French, Italian, and German.

Those languages offered a much wider audience than Yiddish did, however. The Eastern European Jewish immigrants to the United States established a community that would support a host of Yiddish newspapers, journals, and theatres, but a larger audience existed outside the Jewish neighborhoods. For fame-hungry artists, simple demographic facts created what writer Cynthia Ozick calls "the prison of

Yiddish";⁷ those who were kings and queens to Yiddish audiences were invisible to most American theatregoers, and would remain so until they could make themselves understood to non-Yiddish-speakers. Shakespeare's plays provided a cultural bridge between Yiddish actors and English-speaking audiences and critics. Those familiar with The Merchant of Venice did not need to know Yiddish to evaluate Adler's Shylock, especially if an English-speaking cast supported his performance. Maurice Schwartz was even more accommodating to English-speakers; he not only performed excerpts from the same play in English, but also geared the tone of his performance to what he thought would be palatable to his vaudeville audience.

Actors were getting more and more opportunities to perform outside of the Yiddish theatre--some temporarily, like Schwartz, and some for good, like his colleague Paul Muni--for the same reason that audiences were starting to gravitate elsewhere: they were becoming at home in the English language. American culture was also infiltrating the Yiddish theatre, much to some observers' dismay. In 1918, as Eastern European Jews were still coming to America in large numbers, critic Bernard Gorin lamented, "The Yiddish stage is quickly becoming so goyish that it is getting to be impossible to present a true Jewish play."⁸ Gorin reported that young actors were losing touch with their Jewish roots, so that even Orthodox Jewish characters they depicted on stage would open Jewish

books from the wrong side and pray on their knees--"and you do not need to be a great scholar to know that kneeling is not Jewish."⁹ For Gorin, the ultimate sign of the precarious state of Jewishness on the Yiddish stage was that Yiddish itself was in jeopardy. Young actors and actresses who could speak Yiddish fluently made a point of not learning how to read or write the Yiddish alphabet, so that their parts had to be transliterated for them in Latin letters.

Another critic, Y. Mor, noted further ramifications of the American Yiddish theatre in a 1925 essay entitled, "Yiddish theatre à la Broadway." Mor claimed that in a desperate attempt to win back its younger audiences, who were leaving for English-language theatres and vaudeville houses, the Yiddish theatre was trying to imitate its competition, thereby turning itself into

a cheap translation of the bad English theatres. This painful crisis has arisen before our eyes, in the past few years. Almost all of a sudden, the Jewish content is leaving the Yiddish theatre; almost all of a sudden, it is giving up the last bit of its Jewish soul.¹⁰

In these essays, Gorin and Mor were chronicling the beginning of the end of the American Yiddish theatre as it had flourished for the last few decades. It would continue to thrive for a couple of decades more, but ultimately, the tide of Americanization swept it away. Whatever resurgence of interest in Yiddish culture might some day occur, the Yiddish theatre would gradually lose its ability to communicate directly with a large segment of America's Jewish population.

That change did not occur all at once, however, and the Yiddish theatre continued to play a vital role in American Jewish culture into the World War II era. There was little effort to try new Yiddish versions of Shakespeare between the wars, however. Most Yiddish speakers in the United States spoke English as well by then, so Yiddish-speaking Shakespeare fans could just as easily see his plays performed in the original language. Shakespeare in Yiddish also helped eliminate itself; Yiddish productions of Shakespeare helped attract non-Yiddish-speaking reviewers to the Yiddish theatre, thus conferring on that theatre the cultural validation it had so desperately sought. Once the Yiddish theatre felt confident that it could function as a national drama, it no longer relied on Shakespeare to give it legitimacy.

Even then, however, Shakespearean premieres surfaced occasionally in the Yiddish repertory, thanks to Maurice Schwartz and the Yiddish Art Theatre. The company had been operating for eleven years before it mounted a new translation of a Shakespeare play. By the time it produced Mark Schweid's version of Othello, the troupe had set a high enough artistic standard that many Yiddish critics demanded more from the play than just a faithful rendering of the plot. They wanted soaring poetry, and they did not want their Shakespeare modernized.

Schwartz's only subsequent Shakespearean production that gained any attention did not come until 1947. The destruction

of six million Jews in the Holocaust affected the identity of American Jews in ways that continue to make themselves felt today, and in the wake of the war, Schwartz revisited the role of Shylock. For all its dramaturgical problems, Shylock and His Daughter is illuminating as a product of its times: a reworking of a problematic text as if making historical "corrections" in Shylock's story could deter any future damage inflicted by the symbolism of anti-Semitism.

Shylock's Gentile neighbors never cease to remind him of his religion; they refer to him as "Jew" more frequently than they address him by name. Jews of the real Venetian ghetto in the middle ages bore a visible sign of their Jewishness; the law mandated that they wear a yellow circle on the outside of their garments--ancestor of the notorious yellow badges required on the clothing of Jews living in the Nazi ghettos and camps. American law, on the other hand, never insisted upon Jewish separateness, but Eastern European Jewish immigrants wore cultural badges which they could shed or change if they chose: religious rituals, clothing, and language.

The movement away from Yiddish that had been building for years accelerated after World War II when, in the words of historian Arthur Hertzberg, "The Jews wanted to get rid of their image as outsiders in America."¹¹ A simple way to do this was to stop one's ears to the sound of Yiddish. What Y. Mor had predicted in 1925 ultimately came to pass: "Soon,

soon, the Yiddish theatre will belong to a small audience of . . . elderly Jews."¹² One of those Jews quotes Shakespeare to make a point in Tony Kushner's Angels in America:

RABBI ISIDOR CHEMELWITZ: "Sharfer vi di tson fun a shlang iz an umdankbar kind!"

LOUIS: I don't speak Yiddish.

RABBI ISIDOR CHEMELWITZ: Sharper than the serpent's tooth is the ingratitude of children. Shakespeare. Kenig Lear.¹³

In the didactic spirit of Jacob Gordin, the rabbi cites Shakespeare's famous line to chide Louis, who abandoned his grandmother at the end of her life. The message no longer works in Yiddish any more, though; the audience has become American.

Just when Yiddish seems to have become obsolete in America, however, the story takes a curious twist. Yiddish has entered the academy, and young American Jews whose parents were estranged from the language are studying it, singing its songs, reading its folklore--in short, forming intellectual and spiritual connections with the world of their grandparents and great-grandparents. Part of that connection involves a discovery of the many exciting expressions of Yiddish culture, including theatre.

For those who want to conduct scholarly research on Yiddish theatre, there is much work to be done. Much of it is very basic; chronologies of play premieres and bibliographies of works by and about the playwrights and critics would greatly facilitate more analytical research. Scholars should focus more on production history than on analyzing the drama,

which has taken a disproportionate amount of space in studies so far. The personalities who shaped the Yiddish theatre have inspired a great deal of anecdotal material, but carefully researched biographies of most of them have yet to be written. Those personalities had much more contact with other cultures than has been indicated in general histories, and the cultural intersections between the American Yiddish theatre and other theatres deserve closer attention. One such intersection involves the Yiddish theatre outside the United States; comparative work could show what traits Yiddish theatre shares from place to place, and what, if anything, makes the Yiddish theatre of one country different from its counterparts elsewhere. Local history is just as important; the story of the Yiddish theatre in such American cities as Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, and elsewhere could keep many scholars busy for a long time.

The history of Shakespeare on the American Yiddish stage documents one way in which American Jews navigated their dual allegiance: to the religious tradition of their ancestors and to the new home that offered so much freedom and opportunity. Studying the American Yiddish theatre sheds light on an institution that played a central role in the cultural life of American Jewry for over half a century. Every facet of the American Yiddish theatre--that remarkably energetic, often outrageous, occasionally brilliant phenomenon--deserves our attention.

NOTES

1. Herb Gardner, Conversations With My Father (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 14.
2. Cynthia Ozick, "Envy; or, Yiddish in America," in The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1983), 68.
3. Der Lakhediger, "Halt Shakspir a hoyzn shop?" Forverts, 23 April 1916.
4. Moyshe Zeifert, "Di geshikhte fun idishn teater," in Di idishe pine, ed. Chanon Jacob Minikes (New York, 1897), 44.
5. Moyshe Zeifert, "Der groyser mes." In Amerike, ed. Y. Vortsman (New York: Farlag "Natsyonale Bibliotek," 1909), 40.
6. "The Yiddish Shylock of Jacob P. Adler," New York Times, 16 May 1905.
7. Ozick, "Envy; or, Yiddish in America," 47.
8. Bernard Gorin, "Goyishkayt in idishn teater," Tsukunft 23 (Dec. 1918), 741.
9. Ibid.
10. Y. Mor, "Idish teater à la Broadway," Tsukunft 30 (Dec. 1925), 715-16.
11. Arthur Hertzberg, The Jews in America (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1989), 306.
12. Mor, "Idish teater à la Broadway."
13. Tony Kushner, Angels in America. Part One: Millennium Approaches (New York: Theatre Communications Group), 1993.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. Jewish Culture, History, and Religion

- Bernheimer, Charles, ed. The Russian Jew in the United States. Philadelphia: The John Winston Co., 1905.
- Cahan, Abraham. The Education of Abraham Cahan. Translated by Leon Stein, Abraham P. Conan, and Lynn Davison. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969.
- Cohen, Sarah Blacher, ed. From Hester Street to Hollywood. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983.
- Dawidowicz, Lucy, ed. The Golden Tradition. Boston: Beacon, 1967.
- Eilberg-Schwartz, Howard, ed. People of the Body. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.
- Friedman, Lester D. Hollywood's Image of the Jew. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1982.
- Gabler, Neil. An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood. New York: Crown Publishers, 1988.
- Gilman, Sander. The Jew's Body. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Hapgood, Hutchins. The Spirit of the Ghetto. 1902. Reprint Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967.
- Heilman, Samuel. The People of the Book: Drama, Fellowship, and Religion. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Heinze, A. R. Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.
- Hertzberg, Arthur. The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.
- Hoberman, J. Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds. New York: Museum of Modern Art and Schocken Books, 1991.
- Howe, Irving. World of Our Fathers. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.

- Johnson, Paul. A History of the Jews. New York: Harper & Row, 1987.
- Lamm, Maurice. The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning. New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1969.
- _____. The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980.
- Madison, Charles A. Jewish Publishing in America. New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1976.
- Miron, Dan. A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century. New York: Schocken Books, 1973.
- Rischin, Moses. The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962.
- Rosten, Leo. The Joys of Yiddish. New York: Washington Square Press, 1970.
- Sachar, Howard M. A History of the Jews in America. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992.
- Sanders, Ronald. The Downtown Jews. New York: Harper & Row, 1969.
- Schauss, Hayyim. The Jewish Festivals. Translated by Samuel Jaffe. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1938. Reprint New York: Schocken Books, 1962.
- _____. The Lifetime of a Jew. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1950.
- Slobin, Mark. Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982.
- Soltes, Mordecai. The Yiddish Press: An Americanizing Agency. New York: Columbia University Teachers College, 1925.

II. Theatre History and Criticism

- Bialik, Ilana. "Audience Response in the Yiddish 'Shund' Theatre." Theatre Research International 13 (Summer 1988), 91-105.
- Bialin, A.H. Maurice Schwartz un der yidisher kunst teater. New York: Biderman, 1934.

- Buchwald, Nathaniel. Teater. New York: Farlag-Komitet Teater, 1943.
- Carlson, Marvin. The Italian Shakespearians. Washington, D.C.: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1985.
- Cypkin, Diane. "Second Avenue: The Yiddish Broadway." Ph.D. Diss., New York University, 1986.
- Dank, David. Shvarts af vays. New York, 1963.
- Durham, Weldon B., ed. American Theatre Companies, 1888-1930. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987.
- Goldberg, A. Unzer dramaturgye. New York: YKUF and Yekhiel Levenstein Bukh-Komitet, 1961.
- Gorin, B. Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater. 2 volumes. New York: Max N. Mayzel, 1923.
- _____. "Goyishkayt in idishn teater." Tsukunft 23 (Dec. 1918), 741.
- Grimsted, David. Melodrama Unveiled: American Theatre and Culture, 1800-1850. Chicago, 1968.
- Kagan, Berl. Leksikon fun yidish-shraybers. New York: Ilman-Cohen, 1986.
- Kaufman, Rhoda Helfman. "The Yiddish Theatre in New York and the Immigrant Community: Theatre as Secular Ritual." Ph.D. Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1986.
- Kohansky, Mendel. "The Curtain Comes Down: A Hundred Years of the Yiddish Stage." Forum (1976), 112.
- Kornblith, Z. Di dramatishe kunst. New York: Itshe V. Biderman's Bukh Gesheft, 1928.
- Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur. 8 volumes. New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1958-1981.
- Lifson, David S. The Yiddish Theatre in America. New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1965.
- Marmor, Kalmen. Yankev Gordin. New York: YKUF, 1953.
- Mestel, Yankev. Zibetsik yor teater repertuar. New York: YKUF, 1954.
- _____. Unzer teater. New York: YKUF, 1943.

- Miller, James. The Detroit Yiddish Theater, 1920 to 1937. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967.
- Mor, Y. "Idish teater a la Broadway." Tsukunft 30 (Dec. 1925), 715-16.
- Mukdoiny, A. Teater. New York: A. Mukdoiny Yubiley-Komitet, 1927.
- Odell, G.C.D. Annals of the New York Stage, vols. 12-15. New York, 1940-49.
- Osherovitch, M. Dovid Kessler un Muni Vayzenfraynd. New York, 1930.
- Perlmutter, Sholem. Yidishe dramaturgn un teater compositors. YKUF, 1952.
- Perlzon, Y. "Mit hundert yor tsurik." Der Forverts, 10 April 1975.
- Sandrow, Nahma. Vagabond Stars. New York: Limelight Editions, 1977.
- Sayler, Oliver M., ed. Max Reinhardt and His Theatre. New York: Brentano's, 1924.
- Scolnicov, Hanna and Peter Holland, eds. The Play Out of Context. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Seiger, Marvin. "A History of the Yiddish Theatre in New York City to 1892." Ph.D. Diss., Indiana University, 1960.
- Seller, Maxine Schwartz, ed. Ethnic Theatre in the United States. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983.
- Shatsky, Dr. Yakov. Arkhiy far der geshikhte fun yidishn teater un drame. New York: YIVO Ester Rokhl Kaminska Teater-musey, 1930.
- Stokes, John, Michael R. Booth, and Susan Bassnett. Bernhardt, Terry. Duse: The Actress in Her Time. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Williams, Simon. German Actors of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985.
- Zylbercweig, Zalmen. Leksikon fun yidishn teater. Six volumes. New York, 1931-1970.
- _____. Teater mozaik. New York: Biderman, 1941.

III. Shakespeare on the Stage and on the Page

"Adler in Shylock at Academy of Music." Jewish Exponent, 8 May 1903.

"Adler's Shylock." Di yidishe gazeten, 19 May 1905.

"Adler's Shylock in Harlem." New York Times, 19 June 1906.

Aleksandrov, Kh. "Shylock af der idisher bine." Dos abend-blatt, 28 Dec. 1901.

Alter, Iska. "When the Audience Called 'Author! Author!': Shakespeare on New York's Yiddish Stage." Theatre History Studies 10 (1990), 141-62.

Atkinson, Brooks. "On Second Avenue." New York Times, 30 Nov. 1947, II, 1.

Ben Avuye, Elisha. "In idishn teater." Der tog, 12 and 26 Nov. 1920.

Biancolli, Louis. "Shylock as the Victim of Venice." New York World-Telegram, 30 Sept. 1947.

Bloom, Harold, ed. Shylock. New York: Chelsea House, 1991.

Boraisha-Fogel, Adah. "Shakespeare Translations in Yiddish." Jewish Book Annual 14 (1956-57), 32-37.

Bristol, Michael. Shakespeare's America/America's Shakespeare. London: Routledge, 1990.

Buchwald, Nakhum, "'Otel' in idishn kunst teater," Morgen-frayhayt, 7 Feb. 1929.

_____. "'Shylock un zayn tokhter' in idishn kunst-teater." Morgen-frayhayt, 10 Oct. 1947.

Cahan, Abraham. "Gordin's Mirele Efros." Forverts, 10 March 1908.

_____. "Maurice Schwartz hot groysn erfolg af der amerikaner vaudeville stage." Forverts, 25 April 1930.

_____. "'Othello' in Shvarts's kunst teater." Forverts, 8 Feb. 1929.

_____. "Ver iz a besere 'Mirele Efros,' Madam Liptzin oder Madam Kaminski?" Forverts, 9 Dec. 1911.

Chapman, John. "Maurice Schwartz Plays Shylock for Palace Fans." New York Daily News, 22 April 1930.

Cohen, Derek. "Shylock and the Idea of the Jew," in Jewish Presences in English Literature, ed. Derek Cohen and Deborah Heller, 25-39. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990.

Corbin, John. "How the Other Half Laughs." Harper's New Monthly Magazine (1898), 41.

Dale, Alan. "Bertha Kalisch, the Yiddish Favorite, Plays Hamlet." New York Morning Journal, 31 January 1901.

Dunn, Esther Cloudman. Shakespeare in America. 1939. Reprint New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968.

Eastman, Arthur M. A Short History of Shakespearean Criticism. New York: Random House, 1968.

Edlin, William. "In der velt fun drame un muzik." Der morgen zhurnal, 10 April 1911.

_____. "'Shylock un zayn tokhter' efnt sezon fun kunst teater." Der tog, 3 Oct. 1947.

Edmonds, Jill. "Princess Hamlet." In The New Woman and Her Sisters, edited by Vivian Gardner and Susan Rutherford. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992.

Entin, Joel. "Der alter Shylock af a nayem untershlag." Idisher kemfer, 24 Oct. 1947.

Epstein, A. "'Shylock' in nayem idishn teater." Der tog, 19 Nov. 1920.

"Erev peysakh vokh in idishn teater." Di varhayt, 18 March 1911.

Fogel, Adah. "Y. Goldbergs yidishe iberzetsung fun Hamlet." Yidishe Shprakh 12 (January-March 1952), 1-11.

Fogelman, L. "'Shylock un zayn tokhter' in idishn kunst teater." Forverts, 3 Oct. 1947.

Fromenson, A. H. Adler's Shylock. Di yidishe gazeten English supplement, 26 May 1905.

_____. "Kalish as Hamlet." Clipping from unidentified newspaper. Scrapbook, Bertha Kalich Papers. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center.

Girzdanski, Dr. M. "Der funt fleysh." Der teater zhurnal, 15 February 1902.

Glants, A. "Di Shekspir oyffirung in kunst teater," Der tog, 8 Feb. 1929.

Goldstein, B. Y. "Af der teater avenue," Di fraye arbeter shtime, 15 Feb. 1929.

Gorin, B. "Schildkraut als Shylock." Der morgen zhurnal, 17 Nov. 1920.

_____. "Shylock oder Der koyfman fun venedig." Der teater zhurnal, 15 December 1901.

"Der goyisher Shylock vos Shekspir hot megayer geven." Di varhayt, 1 April 1911.

Gross, John. Shylock: A Legend and its Legacy. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.

Gutman, C. "'Shylock un zayn tokhter' in idishn kunst teater." Morgen zhurnal, 3 Oct. 1947.

Hapgood, Hutchins. "Star of Yiddish Stage: Bertha Kalisch." Sunday Telegraph, 27 March 1904.

Horowitz, Mayer. "Bibliography of Yiddish Translations of English Literature." Jewish Book Annual 11 (1952-53), 136-53.

"Irving Place--The Merchant of Venice," New York Mirror, 29 March 1911.

Katz, M. "Herr Yankev Adler in Shylock." Di idishe velt, 28 May 1903.

_____. "Shylock's tip revolutsyonirt." Di idishe velt, 29 May 1903.

Kaufman, Dahlia. "The First Yiddish Translation of Julius Caesar," The Field of Yiddish, 5th Collection, ed. David Goldberg (YIVO and Northwestern University Press, 1993), 219-42.

"'King Lear' in Hebrew," New York Times, 13 Aug. 1899.

Kobrin, Leon. "Schildkraut in Shylock." Der idisher kempfer, 7 April 1911.

Kornblith, Z. "Di sheyne amerikanerin." Di yidishe bine, 21 January 1910.

L. "The True Shakespeare's Jew." American Hebrew, 15 May 1903.

L. B. "Schwartz Gives Shylock to Yiddish Stage." New York Times, 30 Sept. 1947.

Levine, Lawrence. Highbrow/Lowbrow: the Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Lipsky, Louis. "Acting and Jacob P. Adler." Jewish Exponent, 8 May 1903.

"Madame Kalisch as Hamlet," New York Dramatic Mirror, 9 February 1901.

"Maurice Schwartz a Fervid Shylock." New York Times, 21 April 1930.

"Maurice Schwartz--Shylock in Vaudeville." Day, 27 April 1930.

Morevski, Avrom. "Shekspir on shtivl," Tsukunft 34 (April 1929), 273-76.

_____. Shylock un Shekspir. Vilna, 1937.

"Mr. Adler in New York." American Hebrew, 29 May 1903.

"Mr. Adler as Shylock." American Hebrew, 8 May 1903.

"Mr. Adler Scores in Shylock Role." New York Times, 15 May 1905.

"Mr. Adler's Shylock." Jewish Exponent, 15 May 1903.

Mukdoiny, Alexander. "Shekspir-oyffirungen," Der morgen-zhurnal, 17 Feb. 1929.

"Der nayer Shylock." Di yidishe gazeten, 29 May 1903.

"Dos naye idishe teater." Yidishes tageblatt, 12 Nov. 1920.

Nomberg, H. D. Romeo un Yulia. Teater-velt 2 (29 Jan.-19 March 1909).

"Notitsn." Der teater zhurnal, 15 February 1902.

"Plays and Players." Globe and Commercial Advertiser, 16 May 1905.

- Prager, Leonard. "Of Parents and Children: Jacob Gordin's The Jewish King Lear." American Quarterly 18 (1966), 506-16.
- _____. "Shakespeare in Yiddish." Shakespeare Quarterly 19 (1968), 149-63.
- Rathbun, Stephen. "In and Out of the Theater," New York Sun, 4 Feb. 1929.
- _____. "New Apollo Theatre, Mary Nash and Ben Ami Start Their Season Next Week." New York Sun, 13 Nov. 1920.
- Sanders, C. W. "Shakespeare in Yiddish." Cleveland Plain Dealer Sunday Magazine, 25 January 1903, 5.
- "Schildkraut als Shylock." Yidishes tageblat, 26 March 1911.
- "Schildkraut as Shylock." New York Times, 12 Nov. 1920.
- "Schildkraut Plays 'Merchant of Venice.'" New York Mail, 12 Nov. 1920.
- "Schildkraut Plays Shylock." New York Clipper, 17 Nov. 1920.
- Schwartz, Maurice. "The Art Era in the Yiddish Theatre." Jewish Tribune, 19 April 1929.
- _____. "Maurice Schwartz erklert varum er shpilt in vaudeville." Forverts, 11 April 1930.
- _____. "Shylock in Vaudeville." Der tog English supplement, 27 April 1930.
- "Schwartz First Did Shylock Under Williamsburg Bridge," New York Herald Tribune, 20 April 1930, VIII, 5.
- Shattuck, Charles. Shakespeare on the American Stage. 2 vols. Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1976 & 1987.
- "Shylock der id." Di yidishe gazeten, 15 May 1903.
- Sinsheimer, Hermann. Shylock: The History of a Character. 1947. Reprint New York: Benjamin Blom, 1963.
- Speaight, Robert. Shakespeare on the Stage. London, 1972.
- Taylor, Gary. Reinventing Shakespeare. New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989.
- Teitelbaum, Abraham. Vilyam Shekspir. New York: YKUF, 1946.

Thomashefsky, Boris. "Hamlet af der yidisher bine." Di teater velt, November 1908.

"The True Shakespeare's Jew." American Hebrew, 15 May 1903.

Tyrrell, Henry. "Jacob Adler--The Bowery Garrick." Theatre Magazine 2 (Nov. 1902), 18-19.

"Vaudeville." New York World, 20 April 1930.

Vintshevski, Morris. "Shylock, a idisher id." Forverts, 28 Dec. 1901.

"Vos far a min yid iz Shylock?" Der teater zhurnal, 1 February 1902.

Watts, Richard, Jr. "Yiddish Art Company Offers Shylock Play." New York Post, 7 Oct. 1947.

Wilken, Jeanette. "Schwartz an Authentic New 'Shylock.'" New York Daily News, 1 Oct. 1947.

Williams, Simon. Shakespeare on the German Stage, Volume I: 1586-1914. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Yaffe, Richard A. "'Shylock and Daughter' Sets Record Straight." P. M., 6 Oct. 1947.

"Yiddish Art Theatre Gives 'New' Othello," New York Times, 4 Feb. 1929.

"The Yiddish Shylock." New York Times, 26 May 1903.

"The Yiddish Shylock of Jacob P. Adler." New York Times, 16 May 1905.

"Yiddish Shylock Viewed from Ghetto Standpoint," New York Times, 31 May 1903.

Zeifert, Moyshe. "Esther Rokhl Kaminski." Di yidishe gazeten, 15 Aug. 1909.

Zylbercweig, Zalmen. "Maurice Schwartz zagt 'Shylock's tokhter'hot groyse idish-natsyonale misye." Morgen zhurnal, 25 July 1947.

_____. "Shakespeare af der yidisher bine un literatur," in 100 yor yidish teater, ed. Charles Klinger (London: Jewish Cultural Society, 1962), 26-32.

IV. Theatrical Autobiography and Biography

Adler, Tsili, with Yakov Tikman. Tsili Adler dertseylt [Celia Adler Recounts]. 2 vols. New York: Tsili Adler Foundation un Bukh-Komitet, 1959.

Adler, Lulla Rosenfeld. The Yiddish Theatre and Jacob P. Adler. New York: Shapolsky Publishers, Inc., 1988.

Dimov, Osip. "Boris Thomashefsky--a fartseykhenung." Der tog, 22 December 1955.

Kadison, Luba and Joseph Buloff. On Stage, Off Stage: Memories of a Lifetime in the Yiddish Theatre. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.

Kaminska, Ida. My Life, My Theater. Translated by Curt Leviant. New York: Macmillan, 1973.

Kobrin, Leon. Erinerungen fun a yidishn dramaturg [Reminiscences of a Yiddish Dramatist]. 2 vols. New York: Committee for Kobrin's Writings, 1925.

Lawrence, Jerome. Actor: The Life and Times of Paul Muni. New York: Putnam, 1974.

Minikes, Chanan Jacob, ed. Di idishe bine. New York, 1897.

Rumshinsky, Joseph. Klangen fun mayn lebn. New York: Farlag Biderman, 1944.

Schildkraut, Joseph. My Father and I. New York: Viking Press, 1959.

Thomashefsky, Bessie. Mayn lebns-geshikhte. New York: Varhayt Publishing, 1916.

Thomashefsky, Boris. Mayn lebns-geshikhte. New York: Trio Press, 1937.

Yablokoff, Herman. Arum der velt mit yidish teater. Two volumes. New York, 1969.

Young, Boaz. Mayn lebn in teater. New York: YKUF, 1950.

V. Shakespeare Adaptations and Translations in Yiddish

A. Published Translations and Adaptations

Asen, Abraham. King Lear. New York, 1947.

Bovshover, Joseph. Shylock or The Merchant of Venice. Also published as Shylock. New York: Katzenellenbogen, 1899. Rpt. New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1911.

Chaver-Paver. "Romeo and Juliet (Play in One Act)." Yidishe Kultur 1 (1956), 59-63.

Gordin, Jacob. The Jewish King Lear (English synopsis). New York: George Jessel Lodge No. 566, December 1905.

_____. Der yidisher kenig Lir. Warsaw: Jewish Theatre Library, 1907.

_____. Mirele Efros. Di yidishe kenigin Lear. New York, 1898. Reprint New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1911.

Hermalin, D. M. Shespir's ovsgevelte verk. New York: Druckerman, 1908.

Schwartz, I. J. Hamlet and Julius Caesar. Serially in Tzukunft. Reprint New York: Forward, 1918.

Zolatarevsky, Isidore. Der yeshive-bokher. Warsaw, 1922.

B. Translations and Adaptations in Manuscript

Der blinder muzikant, oder der yidisher otelo, by Leon Kobrin. Boris Thomashefsky Collection, New York Public Library (NYPL), Jewish Division.

Der blinder muzikant, "specially written for Boris Thomashefsky," 1904. Perlmutter Collection, YIVO Archives.

Coriolanus, translated by Mikhl Goldberg. Thomashefsky Collection, NYPL.

Esther fun eyn gedi. Thomashefsky Collection, NYPL.

Hamlet, translated by Mikhl Goldberg. Perlmutter Collection, YIVO and Thomashefsky Collection, NYPL.

Hamlet, translated by D. M. Hermalin. Perlmutter Collection, YIVO.

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, translated for Boris Thomashefsky by Leon Kobrin. Thomashefsky Collection, NYPL.

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, translated by I. J. Schwartz, 1918. Jacob Ben-Ami Papers, YIVO Archives.

Hamlet, "specially adapted from the German for Madame Bertha Kalish by B. Vilensky." Perlmutter Collection, YIVO.

Hamlet, translated by Moyshe Zeifert, 1892. Thomashefsky Collection, NYPL.

Hamlet, translator unknown. YIVO Archives.

Julius Caesar, translated by D.M. Hermalin. MS of 1895, Perlmutter Collection, YIVO.

Kenig Lir, translator unknown. Thomashefsky Collection, NYPL.

Kenig Richard der driter, translated by Eva Hurwitz. Thomashefsky Collection, NYPL.

Der koyfman fun venedig, translator unknown. YIVO Archives.

Der koyfman fun venedig. Maurice Schwartz Collection, YIVO.

Di litvishe brider Luria. Jacob Gordin Papers, YIVO Archives.

Macbeth, translated by S. Mentsher. YIVO Archives.

Macbeth. Maurice Schwartz Collection, YIVO.

Mirele Efros, by Jacob Gordin. Jacob Gordin Papers, YIVO Archives.

Mirele Efros, by Jacob Gordin. English translation by A. J. Gordin. Jacob Gordin Papers, YIVO Archives.

Othello, translated by Yaakov Bilder, 1893. Perlmutter Collection, YIVO.

Othello, translated by Mikhl Goldberg. Perlmutter Collection, YIVO.

Othello. Maurice Schwartz Collection, YIVO Archives.

Othello, translated by Mark Schweid, 1929. Maurice Schwartz Collection, YIVO Archives.

Romeo and Juliet, translated by Mikhl Goldberg. Perlmutter Collection, YIVO.

Romeo and Juliet, translated by D. M. Hermalin. "Completely new adaptation, and in scenes set by B. Vilenski." Perlmutter Collection.

Romeo and Juliet, translator unknown. YIVO Archives.

Di sheyne amerikanerin, a comedy in five acts, adapted from the German by Leon Kobrin. Thomashefsky Collection, NYPL.

Di shvue baym seyfer-toyre, oder di yidishe romeo un yulie, by Nakhum Rakov. Vilner Archives, YIVO.

Shylock, translated by M. Goldberg. Perlmutter Collection and YIVO Archives.

Shylock, translated by Moyshe Shor. Moyshe Shor Collection, YIVO Archives.

Shylock, translator unknown. Typescript in Jacob Adler Papers, YIVO Archives.

Shylock, der koyfman fun venedig, translated by Joseph Schwartzberg, 1921. YIVO Archives.

Der yeshive bokher, by Isidore Zolotarevsky. Thomashefsky Collection, NYPL.

Der yidisher kenig Lir, by Jacob Gordin. Jacob Gordin Papers, YIVO Archives.

Der yidisher kenig Lir. MS of 1894 in Jacob Gordin Papers, YIVO Archives.