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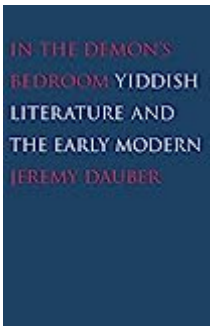

Jeremy Asher Dauber. *In the Demon's Bedroom: Yiddish Literature and the Early Modern.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. x + 399 pp. $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-14175-7.

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The Supernatural Reconsidered

English-readers unfamiliar with premodern Yiddish literature will find in this book four different genres of Yiddish stories about the supernatural. Professor Dauber compares and contrasts these tales, giving the reader a sense of their individuality and complexity. However, the title of this book is deceptively narrow, while its subtitle is deceptively broad. Although this book does indeed deal with a tale of a she-demon in a manâs bedroom, that is only one of the four primary texts examined in this book. And while the early modern era (the sixteenth to the seventeenth century) is indeed the temporal locus of this book, there is no attempt here to examine all of the Yiddish literature of this era. Only tales of the supernatural are examined here.

The introductory chapter of this book is followed by a second chapter that contains a comparative case study of witches and demons in the works of Christopher Marlowe and Shakespeare. After these chapters, the book begins in earnest to examine: 1) a book of fables; 2) the story of a she-demon and a man; 3) *dybbuk* tales; and 4) the chivalric romance called âTale of Briyo and Zimro.â

In his introduction, Dauber tells us that the supernatural element shared by the four stories suggests that all four genres are open to similar theoretical considerations. All raise questions of potential skepticism of the audience as readers and as thinkers. The topics covered in the rest of the introduction lay out an ambitious set of research questions; only some of them (quite naturally) are covered in detail in this book. By raising more questions than he can possibly answer, the author has set out research agendas aplenty for future researchers.

The second chapter, a detailed study of Marloweâs *Doctor Faustus* (published posthumously in 1604) and Shakespeareâs *Macbeth* (published posthumously in 1623), are there to shed light on the Yiddish works that appear in chapters 3 through 6. After thirty-four pages of close readings suggesting alternate ways of understanding Marlowe and Shakespeare and their works, Dauber says, âIt is not my intention to argue for direct influence between Marlowe and Shakespeare and their respective audiences and the contemporary Jewish textsâ (p. 84). Why, then, include these authors and their works in a

book ostensibly devoted to Yiddish texts? One formulation of Dauberâs answer is to point to ways that texts can âbe simultaneously true and false, both illusion and realityâ (p. 86). But do we need Marloweâs and Shakespeareâs works for this? As Dauber himself perceptively notes in his pre-introductory quote, the Talmud itself (Sanhedrin 92/b) comments on this very topic, and in much the same way. This chapter on Marlowe and Shakespeare, then, fascinating as it is, sheds only a little light on and offers very little insight into the Yiddish texts discussed here.

The third chapter of this book is devoted to *Sefer Mesholim* , a book of thirty-four animal fables published in 1697. Here Dauber notes the role of Hebrew and *loshn koydesh* (Hebrew-Aramaic), and the authorâs assumption of readersâ knowledge of biblical and midrashic stories. These fables presuppose such knowledge, and the audience/readers were able to enjoy their playfulness precisely because they had this knowledge. A section of this chapter is devoted to the role of this bookâs woodcuts and their accompanying captions. Here we see the two working, sometimes in tandem and sometimes at cross purposes. Dauber isolates themes that recur in all four of the genres examined here: tensions between the rich and the poor, the question of theodicy, the place of women and the threat they pose to the established order.

Chapter 4 is entitled ââThinking with *Shedim* [other worldly spirits]â: What Can We Learn from the *Mayse fun Vorms* (The Tale from Worms)?â Dauber claims this story is essentially about the transactional nature of marriage and âthe horrific realities of class inequityâ (p. 152). While allowing for allegoric readings in addition, the lesson of this story, as Dauber sees it, is that the poor can become rich through piety and good deeds, in particular, âgood deeds that domesticate rebellion and affirm the status quoâ (p. 161). At the end of this chapter we find a comparison between this tale and the she-demon story as it appears in the âTale of Poznan,â written almost two centuries later. The differences between the two stories, Dauber contends, are attributable to the popularization of Lurianic Kabbalah in the interim period. Nevertheless, both she-demon tales deal (albeit in different ways) with issue of gender, class, belief, and skepticism.

Chapter 5, an analysis of the *dybbuk* tales, concentrates on âThe Tale of the Spirit of Koretz,â apparently written in the 1660s. Dauber spends some time discussing âthe âdissonantâ elements of the storyâ (p. 180) that âclearly point to the âfictivenessââ (p. 182) of the events portrayed in the text. Among the hidden lessons of this text, Dauber says, is the question of theodicy: the possessed victim is a pious young lady, seemingly suffering through no fault of her own. In addition, the author claims that the *dybbuk* can be seen as âthe voice of Jewish skepticism and heresyâ (p. 209). Its exorcism âallows for the expunging of deviant identity and replaces it with a positive conformist identityâ (p. 208).

The last text analyzed here is the âTale of Zimro and Biryo.â Dauber rightly says that this tale provides us with the opportunity to investigate cultural âporosityâ (p. 217). In addition, he claims it complicates traditional Jewish concepts of masculinity and sexuality. The star-crossed lovers of this tale are not allowed to marry because Zimro is not as âhighly bornâ as Biryo.[1] Although the hero succeeds in a quest, he does not get the heroine in this world. The lovers reunite only in the world of fantasy or in the next world. This story, then, expresses genuine doubt about and concern with âthe moral valencesâ of chivalric, erotic love (p. 253).

Just because the early modern era was a time when the traditional Jewish world was in flux, one would have expected Dauber to contrast the major elements in these stories with the way these elements were treated in traditional Jewish literature. It is regrettable that he does not do so. While the Talmud does not have she-demons living with a man, it does have Ashmedai, king of the demons, showing an interest in lying with Batsheva, the mother of King Solomon. Because Ashmedai is King Solomonâs wannabe-double in this story,[2] the story is not simply one of demon-human conjugal relations; it is one of potential incest. Dauber knows the Ashmedai story; he refers to it on page 242. However, how the Ashmedai story may have influenced the Yiddish she-demon story has yet to be explored.

Another element in one of the stories that has a Talmudic counterpart is the notion of possession. While the *dybbuk* of the early modern era is unthinkable without Lurianic Kabbalah, nevertheless, this concept has a Talmudic counterpart in the Babylonian Talmud *Gittin*, where we are told: âhe who has been seized by kordaikos â¦â[3] Here the discussion revolves around an illness/spirit that so entirely grips a man, that he is not held responsible for his words or actions. It is most unfortunate that Dauber did not examine the development of this idea of a spirit/illness that âgripsâ a man from its Talmudic antecedents to its appearance in the early modern era.

The missing vertical dimension in this book is coupled with a missing horizontal dimension. Some of the themes that recur in the Yiddish literature of this era have

parallels in the then-contemporary Hebrew literature. A critique of the eraâs obsession with social standing in the arrangement of marriages, for example, surfaces in the Hebrew works of the period, as Elhanan Reiner has shown.[4] Since the early modern era was bilingual, (or at least diglossic), there is every reason for scholars who study this era to examine Hebrew-language texts alongside their contemporary Yiddish-language texts.[5]

Finally, Dauber says in his introduction that ârelative inattentionâ has been paid to these works. While this may be true for English-language research, it is by no means true for Hebrew-language research. A database search of Hebrew-language writing on the subjects of demons and/or *dybbuk*s, for example, yields a plethora of books, articles, and doctoral dissertations, all written since Sarah Zfatman Billerâs work (her book was published in 1993) or Yosef Danâs work (Danâs two Hebrew-language books were written in 1974 and 1975. Two of his more recent English-language articles are noted and referred to by Dauber). It is unfortunate to see the work of an entire generation of scholars overlooked.

Notes

[1]. This is precisely the issue that arises in the text Reiner discusses (see endnote 4). One looks forward to a study of the different works of the era that address this issue.

[2]. For the whole story, see Gittin 68/a-b.

[3]. The rest of this quote is: âand says âwrite my wife a divorce,â itâs as though he said nothingâ (Gittin 67/b). The sages are divided on what âkordaikosâ means. But all agree that affliction with this illness renders a man unable to function intelligently.

[4]. See â*Maâase she-ira be-kâk Vermayza be-raâash ha-gadol shnat szâav: sipur ahava Ashkenazi ganuz likhâora be-sefer sheâelot u-tshuvot min ha-meâah ha-shva esreh, ben bat ashirim le-shluyat ketsavim*â: An Incident that Occurred in the Holy Community of Worms in the Period of the Great Earthquake of 1636–An Ashkenazic Love Story Seemingly Tucked Away in a Responsa Book from the Seventeenth Century between a Rich Familyâs Daughter and a Butcherâs Apprentice,â *Ha-aretz*, October 6, 2006.

[5]. My Israeli colleague, Noga Rubin, and I have, I believe, shown that Hebrew-language texts can be profitably studied alongside contemporary Yiddish-language texts. In our paper âPious Wrappings, Troubling Insides: Four Different Genres of Ashkenazic Literatureâ (*Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 7, no. 3 [November 2008]: 269-282), we showed that four different genres of literature, three in Yiddish and one in Hebrew, used the technique of a pious frame to mask troubling social realities.