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Review of Rella Kushelevsky, *Penalty and Temptation: Hebrew Tales in Ashkenaz*

Abstract

Most *Fabula* readers do not have an easy access to Hebrew books, and therefore it would be highly advisable to have the present volume available in a more accessible language to folklore scholars around the world. The issues that Rella Kushelevsky addresses, the texts that she interprets, and the analytical method that she employs are all relevant to current folklore scholarship, and therefore they can generate constructive debates, new research directions, and formulate new questions regarding medieval folklore.

Disciplines

Cultural History | Folklore | Jewish Studies | Medieval History | Near and Middle Eastern Studies

ihre Zugehörigkeit zum mythologischen Genre belegen. In Kapitel 9 folgt schließlich eine Synthese aus Analyse-Ergebnissen und memetischem Genreansatz. Genres seien letztlich als Ansammlungen von Memplexen zu verstehen, Genrebildung und -weiterentwicklung sind entsprechend evolutionäre Prozesse. Die Konklusion verbindet abschließend die wichtigsten Ergebnisse der Einzelanalysen, das mythologische Genre und die verwendete Theorie.

Kneis' ausführliche, dennoch übersichtliche Analyse läßt hohe Ansprüche und ein kritisches Auge fürs Detail erkennen, was das Buch nicht nur für Kenner der besprochenen Primärwerke lesenswert macht. Wie erwähnt wird, steckt die Anwendung der Memetik für kulturwissenschaftliche Untersuchungen noch in den Anfängen und sei als strikte Kultur- beziehungsweise textimmanente Perspektive auch dezidiert nicht als einziges mögliches Analysehandwerk zu verstehen. Entsprechend ist bereits der Mut zu diesem Theorie-Experiment zu loben. Überzeugen kann die gewählte Perspektive nicht ganz, da der Verzicht auf ergänzende Ansätze zum Teil vermeidbare Lücken in der Analyse zur Folge hat. Bei dem vorgestellten mythologischen Genre wären zumindest Verweise auf die Erzählforschung sinnvoll gewesen, ebenso der Bezug auf die Forschung zur Serienanalyse oder zu den behandelten nicht-realistischen Genres. Auch ist die etwas elitär wirkende Einstiegserläuterung, daß es tatsächlich ‚gute‘ TV-Serien gibt, welche die wissenschaftliche Beschäftigung verdienen, nicht zeitgemäß und einer Kulturwissenschaft, die sich mit populären Medienformaten befaßt, schlicht abträglich. Als Qualifikationsarbeit, die am Anfang einer wissenschaftlichen Karriere steht, ist dem Autor jedoch ein beachtliches Werk gelungen.

Baden

Petra Schrackmann

K u s h e l e v s k y , R e l l a : Penalty and Temptation: Hebrew Tales in Ashkenaz. Ms. Parma 2295 (de-Rossi 563) [Hebrew]. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2010. 385 pp.

Most *Fabula* readers do not have an easy access to Hebrew books, and therefore it would be highly advisable to have the present volume available in a more accessible language to folklore scholars around the world. The issues that Rella Kushelevsky addresses, the texts that she interprets, and the analytical method that she employs are all relevant to current folklore scholarship, and therefore they can generate constructive debates, new research directions, and formulate new questions regarding medieval folklore. At a time when the orality in medieval culture is rediscovered (see Reichl, Karl (ed.): *Medieval Oral Literature*. Berlin/Boston 2012), Kushelevsky is focusing on folktales in medieval Jewish script culture, exploring their significance within their scriptural, literary, and historical contexts, and at the same time, positioning herself as a modern interpreting reader of medieval Hebrew narrative. Some of these tales have their roots in Jewish oral tradition, *Torah she-*

be-al pe, of the late antiquities, and others may have been in oral circulation in later periods, but the texts in this volume are folktales that were in script circulation in the Middle Ages.

Kushelevsky analyzes thirteen Hebrew tales that are included in a manuscript in the De Rossi collection of the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma, Italy (Richler, Benjamin (ed.): *Hebrew Manuscripts in the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma, Catalogue*. Jerusalem 2001, 458–460, no. 154; id.: *Guide to Hebrew Manuscript Collections*. Jerusalem 1994, 149–150). The manuscript was copied in northern France or Germany, an area known in Jewish history as *Ashkenaz*, at the end of the 13th century, by six scribes. Evidently, they copied it from a previous manuscript which was likely written around 1160. It contains diverse genres of medieval Jewish texts, and original texts that were composed in *Ashkenaz*, such as chronicles, ethical treatises, sermons, and travelogues. The folktales are not the principle genre of this manuscript of 169 pages. Rather, ten of its tales are found condensed, mostly in thematic clusters, on fifteen pages (p. 126–140), interspersed between other midrashic texts, and three more occur earlier in the manuscript. One story is copied twice, each time by a different scribe, while another tale has only its opening line in the manuscript (no. 3: *Joab's Combat with Amalek*, the complete version of which Kushelevsky quotes from Yasif, Eli: *The Story of Joab's Deeds of Valour (The Literary Aspects of the Medieval Heroic Tale)* [Hebrew]. In: *Yeda-'Am* 19 [1979] 17–20), suggesting a case of scribal censorship. Most of the tales are well known in Jewish traditional literature, and their earlier versions occur in sources of late antiquities (5 tales), post-Talmudic books (1 tale), anthologies of Arab lands (4 tales), Ashkenazic midrashic collections (2 tales), save one tale that apparently originated in that region. Some of them can be designated as versions of internationally known tale types as follows:

- no. 1, 25–49 *Rabbi Joshua ben Levy: A Journey to Paradise and Hell* (ATU 330: *The Smith and the Devil*)
- no. 8, 181–198 *The Thief's Self-Disclosure: A Loyalty Oath and Marriage* (ATU 976: *Which Was the Noblest Act?*)
- no. 9, 199–215 *Cast Your Bread Upon the Water: Loops and Hooks* (implicitly associated with ATU 670: *The Man Who Understands Animal Languages* [See Noy, Dov: *The Jewish Versions of the 'Animal Languages' Folktale (AT 670): A Typological-Structural Study*. In: *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971) 171–208.])
- no. 10, 216–232 *Ben Sever and Shefifon ben Layish: Confrontation with a Dragon-Like Angel of Death* (ATU 303: *The Twins Or Blood-Brothers*)
- no. 11, 233–252 *The Annulment of Three Decrees: Images of Community and Diaspora* (Israel Folktale Archives [IFA] *730 *Endangered Jewish Community is Saved*)
- no. 12, 253–271 *Rabbi Akiba and the Living-Dead in Hell* (Tubach, no. 3213: *Mass, dead appear for*; no. 3388 *Monk returns from dead*)
- no. 13, 272–288 *King Solomon and Ashmadai: He Has Won Renown for His Wonders* (ATU 757: *The Emperor's Haughtiness Punished*)

But Kushelevsky forgoes comparative folkloristic analysis, and opts for contextual interpretation of the texts, on three levels: scriptural, literary, and cultural. While, initially she seems to be wavering between the diachronic thematological method of her colleagues Yoav Elstein and Avidov Lipsker (see Elstein/Lipsker: *The Homogeneous Series in the Literature of the Jewish People: A Thematological Methodology*. In: Trommler, Frank [ed.]: *Thematics Reconsidered: Essays in Honor of Horst S. Daemmrich* [Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft 9]. Amsterdam/Atlanta 1995, 87–116), and the Geertzian synchronic method of “thick description” (Geertz, Clifford: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture*. In: id.: *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York 1973, 3–30), as she delves into the interpretation of the respective tales, the latter takes over, and her analysis shines.

Not being a narrative anthology, the manuscript seems to lack any organizational principle in the clustering the tales into thematic groups. Therefore the tales sequence, and their relations to the non-narrative treatises that either precede or follow them, are of utmost interpretive significance. Kushelevsky delineates four such thematic clusters: (1) *Piety, Sin, and Rewards* (no. 2, 7 [tale no. 7 occurs twice in the manuscript, following tale no. 2 and then as tale no. 7; Kushelevsky proposes that the repetition is due to technicality, involving the hands of two different scribes, and considers only the second occurrence of the tale in the manuscript, yet, it appears that its first occurrence is relevant as well]) about disparity between apparent righteous and actual sinful behavior; (2) *Repentance Tales* (nos. 5–7), about men who either commit adultery and repent, or overcome their sexual desire; (3) *Unintentional Consequences of Speech or Action* (nos. 8–9); and (4) *Tales of Demons and Ghosts* (nos. 10–13), and considers some non-narrative texts to be the scriptural context of the first four tales. Such narrative clusters represent the emic interpretation of these tales, and they offer insights into the symbolic meanings of the tales in their medieval society. Yet, most interesting is the tale that never was in the manuscript due to scribal censorship. The third tale was intended to be an exegetical interpretation of the story of Naaman, the Aramite commander, who sought cure to his leprosy (II Kings 5,1–20). The medieval narrative about Joab also includes an episode of magical cure, but it is replete with horrific acts of cruelty that the scribes, apparently, could not accept being attributed to a biblical hero and therefore censored and deleted it from the manuscript.

The manuscript versions serve Kushelevsky as the basic texts for her literary analysis of the tales, in which she employs basic critical concepts such as intertextuality (see Martínez Alfero, María Jesús: *Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept*. In: *Atlantis* 18 [1996] 268–285; Worton, M./Still, Judith [eds.]: *Intertextuality: Theories and Practice*. Manchester 1990; Julia Kristeva initially proposed this concept in her essays *Word, Dialogue and Novel* and *The Bounded Text* later included in her book: *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. ed. Leon S. Roudiez. New York 1980) and reader’s response (Iser, Wolfgang: *The Act of Reading: A theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore 1978). Reading the texts closely, she alludes to preceding versions of the tales that appear in earlier Jewish sources, as well as analogous themes that recur in

other tales. In her literary analysis of the text she effectively makes use of the thematological method. Following it, she includes in the *Appendix* (300–328) most valuable bibliographical lists of all the versions of these tales which are available in print, manuscripts and archives. Such a literary analysis makes possible for Kushelevsky to point out the uniqueness of the versions in the Parma manuscript.

Culturally, Kushelevsky seeks to examine the manuscript versions of the tale in terms of the historical, social, spiritual, and religious life of medieval Jewish society in *Ashkenaz*. In particular, she assumes, and seeks to confirm, that the manuscript evolved within the circle of *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, a pietistic movement that was headed by Rabbi Samuel ben Kalonymus He-Ḥasid (12th century) and his son Rabbi Judah ben Samuel He-Ḥasid (ca 1150–1217; there is a voluminous scholarship about this movement; a valuable introduction is Marcus, Ivan G.: *Piety and Society: The Jewish Pietists of Medieval Germany*. Leiden 1981). The theology and belief system of this movement built not only upon Jewish religious tradition but also incorporated beliefs and ideas that prevailed in medieval German folk-culture. Unfolding the tales as condensed texts that include reference to Jewish social and religious values as well as to Christian ideas the filtered into Jewish society, Kushelevsky regards these versions not only as links in the chain of narrative transmission, but also as tales that are integral part of their society and time. They are “thick” texts, to borrow a phrase from Clifford Geertz, and in approaching them that way, Kushelevsky challenges folklore scholarship. Is such an approach of close textual reading, usually associated with literary texts, applicable only to tales circulating in script culture or is it appropriate to their performance in oral culture as well?

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M o h r , J u d i t h : Zwischen Mitteleerde und Tintenwelt. Zur Struktur Fantastischer Welten in der Fantasy (Kinder- und Jugendkultur, -literatur und -medien Band 72). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012. 374 S.

Der Markt für Fantasy in den verschiedensten Medien expandiert und verändert sich so rasend schnell, daß es auch Experten nicht leicht fällt, den Überblick zu bewahren. Bestandsaufnahmen – auch wenn sie niemals das gesamte Feld abdecken können – sind in dieser Situation hochwillkommen. Mit der Konzentration auf die Gestaltung fantastischer Welten in der zeitgenössischen, vorwiegend deutschsprachigen Fantasy-Literatur greift die vorliegende Dissertation nur einen – wenn auch zentralen – Teilbereich heraus (ausgespart bleiben z.B. Film, Comics und Computerspiele).

Der Umfang des ausgewählten Textcorpus (die Liste der Primärliteratur umfaßt stolze 142 Titel) macht bereits deutlich, daß es der Verfasserin eher um eine Systematisierung denn um eine ausführliche Analyse der vorgefundenen Phänomene