Review of Haim Schwarzbaum, *The Mishle Shu'alim (Fox Fables) of Rabbi Berechiah Ha-Nakdan: A Study in Comparative Folklore and Fable Lore*

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Abstract
With a rare flair for erudition, Haim Schwarzbaum repeats his performance in the 1968 volume of Studies in Jewish and World Folklore and presents us with a book that is bound to be a keystone in any comparative fable research. As in his previous comprehensive study, Schwarzbaum has chosen an existing extensive collection of texts, each narrative of which he annotates exhaustively. The result is nothing less than a monumental collection of analytical bibliographical monographs that detail the history and diffusion of some fables central in Asian and European folk-literary traditions. In his introduction Schwarzbaum discusses fable use in political oratory and homiletic exegesis. In the main, he draws upon examples from Jewish tradition and classical literature; however, whenever possible and applicable, he extends his references to fable uses in literary documents ranging from ancient Mesopotamia to modern Europe. The introductory essay concludes with a critical analysis of the current scholarship about the text that Schwarzbaum uses for his study, The Mishle Shu'alim (Fox Fables) of Rabbi Berechiah Ha-Nakdan.

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

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societies. Folk and fairy tales have always spread word through their fantastic images of the feasibility of utopian alternatives, and this is why the dominant social classes have been vexed by them [p. 3].

Zipes neither presents nor refers to any evidence to show that the folk view tales in this way. And in spite of these populist pleadings, the author betrays his own elitist attitude with such references as the one to more refined and subtle forms of cultural expression than folktales. And in distinguishing “folklore” from “literature,” Zipes also contrasts folklore’s “unconscious structure” with literature’s “conscious design” (p. 11). How often have we heard (and refuted) that before?

A third criticism is of the vast generalizations, many of which are either unverifiable or wrong. Zipes assumes, for example, that “the folk tale was still the dominant art form among the common people in the nineteenth century” (p. 15) but cites no evidence. What assumptions underlie this statement? And what could it mean? Or again, when Zipes mentions the “immanent meaning of the tales,” he is assuming something that is perhaps better not assumed. Performance theory and contextual studies have taught us to be wary of assigning absolute meaning to texts.

There is also a good deal of repetition and inconsistency among the essays. For instance, a distinction between folk (oral) and fairy (written) tales is made in the first essay, but even this simplified definition is not adhered to throughout. Moreover, it is not useful to label Star Wars, The Lord of the Rings, and Superman “fairy-tale films.” Zipes presents no rationale for this approach. “Fairy tale” seems to mean “fantasy,” but that is not precise enough in a scholarly work. Lastly, there is a lot of theorizing in this book, but very little citation from orally collected tales or from folkloristic literature.

Ironically, Zipes’s criticism of Freud and Jung provides the best criticism of his own work: “these research expeditions have been deceptive. In fact, it is almost meaningless to describe them as ‘research’ since they only fish for what their psychological premises dictate” (p. 41). For “psychological,” substitute something like “Marxist-counter-cultural-political,” and you have the problem with this book. The difference is that Freud and Jung still have value, even though they wrote before folkloristic research had dispelled many assumptions. Breaking the Magic Spell not only has little value but is written without cognizance of the strides that folklore as a discipline has made since the 1950s.

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The Mishle Shu’alim (Fox Fables) of Rabbi Berechiah Ha-Nakdan: A Study in Comparative Folklore and Fable Lore. By Haim Schwarzbaum. (Kiron, Israel: Institute for Jewish and Arab Folklore Research, 1979. Pp. iv + 658, introduction, bibliography, table of narrative types, table of narrative motifs, general index)

With a rare flair for erudition, Haim Schwarzbaum repeats his performance in the 1968 volume of Studies in Jewish and World Folklore and presents us with a book that is bound to be a keystone in any comparative fable research. As in his previous comprehensive study, Schwarz-
baum has chosen an existing extensive collection of texts, each narrative of which he annotates exhaustively. The result is nothing less than a monumental collection of analytical bibliographical monographs that detail the history and diffusion of some fables central in Asian and European folk-literary traditions. In his introduction Schwarzbaum discusses fable use in political oratory and homiletic exegesis. In the main, he draws upon examples from Jewish tradition and classical literature; however, whenever possible and applicable, he extends his references to fable uses in literary documents ranging from ancient Mesopotamia to modern Europe. The introductory essay concludes with a critical analysis of the current scholarship about the text that Schwarzbaum uses for his study, The Mishle Shu'alim (Fox Fables) of Rabbi Berechiah Ha-Nakdan.

Very little is known about the medieval author and his book. Rabbi Berechiah Ha-Nakdan, possibly Benedictus le Puncteur of Oxford, lived in the 12th or 13th centuries in both France and England. His name reflected his profession as a grammarian who vocalized ("punctuated") religious Hebrew texts. As a medieval scribe, he translated and edited a few books that dealt with a wide range of topics from nature to ethics, but he is best known for his fable collection that primarily had entertaining value. Although both biblical and postbiblical Jewish literature had included references to and examples of fables, Mischle Shu'alim was the first fable anthology in Hebrew in which the narratives were extracted from any rhetorical context and presented in sequence. Rabbi Berechiah Ha-Nakdan had a distinct literary intent and rendered the fables in the high poetic diction of the rhymed prose that was popular in medieval Jewish and Arabic literature. The collection was first published in 1557-59 and since then has appeared in 18 editions, including an English translation by Moses Hadas, Fables of a Jewish Aesop (1967).

Despite the occurrence of fables in Jewish folk and literary traditions, Rabbi Berechiah Ha-Nakdan barely resorted to these Hebrew sources. Rather, he culled most of the fables in his collection from medieval European sources. Previously, scholars have tended to identify the fable collection of Marie de France (written between 1170 and 1180) as the possible prime source for the Mishle Shu'alim. However, through detailed comparisons with other medieval fable collections, Schwarzbaum convincingly demonstrates that there is no single source for the present collection. Rather, he argues, Berechiah Ha-Nakdan prepared a true fable anthology, selecting from several sources without confining himself to a single model.

This quality of Mishle Shu'alim makes it particularly adequate as a basis for comparative analysis and annotation. Although the book is now part of medieval Hebrew literature, it comprises texts that were current in several European fable traditions. Schwarzbaum, whose erudition extends into Islamic tradition as well as the literatures of several European languages, is able to discuss the thematic variations that occur in many fable versions and to establish points of both contact and divergence among several fable traditions.

Out of these comparative studies there emerges a panoramic view of fable literature. The interliterary contacts that Schwarzbaum is able to establish suggest, as Curtius did in his classical European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, a European society in which languages were boundaries for contact between peoples rather than borders to fence them off. By the 12th and 13th centuries, or even earlier, the fable tradition might have been, as Thompson contends (The Folktales, p. 218), part of the literary rather than oral traditions of European languages; if this indeed was the case, then Schwarzbaum's book documents, with 118 separate studies, the consolidation of a literary tradition that emerged in the wane of a particular oral genre in Western cultures. Bibliographically, he expands these studies into the ancient history of the
Near East, on the one hand, and into modern folklore research in Europe, and Israel in particular, on the other.

Consequently, this volume is indispensable for any folklore library, and its inexhaustible references and bibliographies should be an essential starting point for any future fable research.

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**Ecrits Louisianais du Dix-Neuvième Siècle. Nouvelles, Contes et Fables.** Edited by Gerard Labarre


The most laudable aspect of this book is its aim: "to make available some of the writings of the Louisiana French authors and to illustrate the written and oral traditions of French-speaking Louisiana" (p. xix, and also p. xxx; the introduction is given in French and English versions). Specialists of French culture in North America, and especially those in Canada, will be disappointed by this offering, and folklorists of any color will be angered.

The most the work does is to perform a piece of literary archaeology; so as not to insult my archaeologist friends, let me add that it is of the antiquarian variety. For we have here a collection of texts which are largely undiscussed, unannotated, and, in parts, unreadable to all but a select few. One wonders, to whom is the book addressed? The answer, one must assume, is to Louisiana natives, who presumably know all about the historical context of French settlement in Louisiana, since there is absolutely no discussion or description of its history. We are told laconically that "Louisiana retained a strong French influence until the Civil War, despite forty years of Spanish domination and its admission to the Union in 1812" (p. xix). But what happened before? What were the forces that shaped these now crumbling monuments of 19th-century Louisiana culture? I will not waste the reader's time asking all the questions which, if answered, might have set this disparate mélange of texts in a valid perspective.

Perhaps the book is addressed to the literary scholar. Certainly, the largest part of the introduction covers some of the concerns of the authors whose modest achievements occupy over half of the textual content of the book. The first section of four, entitled "Nouvelles et Récits," includes writings by five well-educated mid 19th-century Louisiana francophones. But apart from some very general comments on their style in the introduction, and the briefest of biographical notes as each author appears, all we really learn is that far from seeking real inspiration from their environment, mid 19th-century francophone authors wrote in a pale imitation of their contemporaries of the Romantic Movement in France. The editors themselves conclude that the writings are "dated by excessive sentimentality . . . depicting only a partial view of the period" (p. xxviii). If these authors have been "too long forgotten" (p. xxvii), then it is the editors' task to show us why they should not remain forgotten. It does not do their cause any good to refer to "lyrical and often grandiloquent language" or "exaggerated sentimentality" (p. xx) or to include what "is merely a charming little literary exercise filled with facile, somewhat exaggerated romanticism" (p. xxiii).

The second section, "Contes Folkloriques," will make the folklorist fume. In a sense, it is