



## Sabotaging the Text: Tannhäuser in the Works of Heine, Wagner, Herzl, and Peretz

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**T**he line of cultural evolution of the Tannhäuser myth is particularly interesting because of the prominent role played by Richard Wagner in the transmission: it shows how even the work of an antisemite can become a tool for Jewish cultural cohesion. In the following article, I will document the evolution and metamorphosis of the myth of Tannhäuser as it came into contact with Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), and I. L. Peretz (1852–1915). The transformation of Tannhäuser will be shown to be a model of how outside sources are adapted by Jewish writers and thinkers as tools to express specifically Jewish constructs. The moments of change in Tannhäuser are representative of moments of contact and influence between Jewish and non-Jewish elements.

In the first work that I will consider, Heine adapts the medieval ballad “Tannhäuser” into a comic poem that subverts the German political situation. Then, inspired in part by Heine’s poem, Wagner creates his opera of the same name, eliminating the comedy Heine had inserted, and reintroducing German nationalistic elements. Herzl further expands the ballad by using Wagner’s opera as a source of inspiration for the development of his Zionism. Finally, the Yiddish writer Peretz reworks Wagner’s opera in his 1904 short story “Mesires-nefesh” (Self-sacrifice) when he transforms it into a tale about the importance of Jewish learning.

The original ballad of Tannhäuser evolves as it passes through the

hands of Heine, Herzl, and Peretz. Each stage reflects a moment in the transmission of ideas and shows how Jewish thinkers work with the products of the culture that surround them and adjust them to fit their needs. As they reintroduce the cultural product back into society, it moves to the next actor in the line of transmission. The Tannhäuser text, an expression of German folklore, is sabotaged and subverted by Heine, Herzl, and Peretz in such a way that Germanic elements are satirized, suppressed, or replaced with Judaic elements. (There is a second line of transmission in pre-modern Yiddish literature where the medieval Tannhäuser legend is rewritten in one of the stories of the 1602 *Maaseh bukh*.)<sup>1</sup>

In comparing the Jewish adaptations to the original, differences between Christian and Jewish notions of sin, redemption, knowledge, and self-sacrifice will be presented. The use made of “tainted greatness”<sup>2</sup> like Wagner’s will also be considered in the analysis of Herzl’s and Peretz’s choosing to use the work of a prominent antisemite. This article will focus in greatest detail on Peretz’s story as the representative final stage in the development of the Tannhäuser myth.

The basic story of the original thirteenth-century medieval ballad<sup>3</sup> is quite simple: the knight Tannhäuser enters the Venusberg (the mountain paradise—a sinful realm—inhabited by Venus) to live with the goddess. Eventually, feeling that his life is wasting away, he decides that it is time to leave and return to earth, and Venus reluctantly allows him to go. Tannhäuser heads to the pope to seek absolution for the sin of being with her, which the pope refuses to give, leaving him no choice but to return to the Venusberg. Once there, God demonstrates that Tannhäuser has been redeemed by having his staff bloom into flowers, but it is too late to save him because the pope has already consigned him to hell. The poem ends by chiding the pope for his too hasty rejection of Tannhäuser: “Darumb ensal gheen pawes watdoen / hye ensulle syck wal bedencken: / als eyn sunder rowen heyfft, / des ensal men nummer krencken” (Therefore no pope should do a thing without considering well: when the sinner shows repentance, that should never be spurned).<sup>4</sup>

## Heinrich Heine

In 1836, the German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine published “Der Tannhäuser.”<sup>5</sup> The poem keeps intact much of the plot of the original medieval ballad while adding a humorous ending that transplants Tannhäuser to contemporary Germany. Like many German romantics, the

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Tannhäuser legend “cast a spell”<sup>6</sup> on Heine, yet rather than using the myth to romanticize Germany, Heine subverted the original by having the poem shift in the latter half to a ribald and humorous account of Tannhäuser’s travels through Europe:

In Dresden I saw a poor old dog  
Who’d made quite a stir in his youth;  
But now he can only bark and piss,  
Having lost his one last tooth.

In Weimar, home of the widowed muse,  
The moans were loud and long.  
The people lamented: “Goethe is dead,  
But Eckermann’s going strong!”<sup>7</sup>

As Laura Hofrichter notes, in “Tannhäuser” the serious beginning is followed by the satiric ending that combine “two very different styles and moods, the old-style love-poem and a contemporary political satire.”<sup>8</sup> Tannhäuser’s destructive love for Venus expressed Heine’s own “disturbing relationship” with a young shop girl at the time,<sup>9</sup> whereas the ending is a satire of “German political and literary conditions.”<sup>10</sup>

In Heine’s hands, Tannhäuser undergoes a radical change. He keeps the quest aspect of the original but transforms its meaning from a religious to a secular one. What remains of the original ballad is the knight, Venus, and the pope, but the motivations and characteristics of each change as they become human rather than archetypal figures. Venus, instead of a symbol of the downfallen, is elevated to a passionate and attractive love object. Tannhäuser also transforms from an archetypal figure to a realistic young man in a torrid relationship with a woman. He has embarked on travels to be near to her, and in the end he actively chooses the Venusberg<sup>11</sup> rather than it being chosen for him as in the medieval original. Although the ending is ostensibly the same—Tannhäuser remains in the Venusberg—it is now a relatively happy ending because he is reunited with his love. Moving the medieval knight into contemporary Germany shifts the ballad from a Catholic to a secular framework. Folklore, often a tool to elevate national consciousness, is used by Heine to subvert it. Thus, by making the tale comic, the original folklore ballad becomes a tool to satirize contemporary Germany.

During the period when he wrote the poem (1835–36), Heine published *Die Romantische Schule* (The Romantic School) in which he negatively identified romanticism with “Christian revival” and attacked both as reactionary movements.<sup>12</sup> One of the main problems of the romantic

movement, according to Heine, was its attempt to “reconcile the past with the present, the traditional with the modern.”<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Heine saw the past as “superstitious, obscurantist, and full of atrocity.”<sup>14</sup> His challenge in *Die Romantische Schule* to the German attachment to romanticism and Christianity is reiterated in “Der Tannhäuser.”

Critics have tended to suggest that “Der Tannhäuser” is flawed because of the abrupt shift in style between its first and second halves<sup>15</sup> (and Heine’s own assertion that it was not perfect has strengthened this critique).<sup>16</sup> However, if one instead sees his intent to challenge German Christianity and romanticism, then the abrupt second half makes more sense. First, he draws the reader in by appropriating a well-known romantic, Christian ballad. Then he sabotages it: the romantic impetus is challenged by making the idealized medieval past debased, therein problematizing romantic nostalgia for the past. The Christian is also subverted by making the hero choose pagan love over Christian morality. Thus, the focus on sin and redemption of the Christian morality tale transforms into a secular love quest that negates completely the Catholic motif. I would assert that the abrupt shift to satire represents the moment when Heine takes the myth’s previous incarnation as a Christian, romantic ballad and uses it against itself by making both seem ridiculous in the context of contemporary German society.

### Richard Wagner

Richard Wagner completed his opera *Tannhäuser* in 1843 and staged it in 1845.<sup>17</sup> The plot is as follows: The story begins in the Venusberg with the knight resting his head on the lap of Venus while bacchantes incite dancing nymphs to join them in their frenzy. Tannhäuser awakens and tells Venus that he longs to return to a simple, fulfilling, earthly life. He begs Venus to release him, and she reluctantly agrees. On Earth, he joins up with minstrels, including his friend Wolfram. They find Elizabeth, Tannhäuser’s earthly love, and Tannhäuser and Elizabeth sing about their broken hearts and joy at finding each other again. Tannhäuser and Wolfram enter a singing contest hosted by Elizabeth’s uncle in which Tannhäuser sings of the pleasure of pagan love. The appalled audience seeks revenge on him for his paganism, but Elizabeth intervenes and saves his life. Contrite, Tannhäuser departs and joins a group of pilgrims heading to Rome. On his return, he attempts to sneak back into the Venusberg but is stopped by Wolfram. Tannhäuser reluctantly admits to Wolfram that the pope has refused to redeem him, stating “Wie dieser Stab in meiner Hand / nie mehr sich schmückt mit

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frischem Brun, kann aus der Holle heissem Bran / Erlösung nimmer dir erbluh'n!" (And as this barren staff I hold / Ne'er will put forth a flower or leaf, / Thus shalt thou nevermore behold / Salvation, or thy sin's relief!)<sup>18</sup> Desperate and spurned, he is seeking to return to the Venusberg. A battle unfolds between Tannhäuser, being drawn back to the Venusberg, and Wolfram, fighting for his soul. Wolfram wins. A funeral procession for Elizabeth arrives, and Tannhäuser dies over her body. A chorus announces that the staff has bloomed. Tannhäuser has been redeemed and may now enter heaven.

The changes that Wagner made were to add a singing contest (inspired by a number of nineteenth-century sources)<sup>19</sup> and the character Elizabeth—the earthly love who redeems Tannhäuser from his sins. As in the original medieval ballad, Wagner's opera is primarily about an individual seeking redemption from his fall. That redemption comes by way of penitence and through the work of a woman. The opera is thus constructed along two binaries: paganism versus Catholicism, and sexual versus spiritual love.

Wagner's opera was inspired by Heine's poem (his early work imitated Heine's style after they became friends),<sup>20</sup> although he would downplay this connection out of artistic pride and his desire to distance his work from that of a Jew.<sup>21</sup> In Heine's poem, Tannhäuser is a figure satirizing contemporary Germany, whereas in Wagner's version, the romantic myth is used to show the possibilities of the redemptive moment, and the story becomes a tool to strengthen rather than to challenge German national consciousness.

Wagner was inspired by Heine's poem (though Carl Dahlhaus points out that Wagner always took what he needed for his art from whatever source was handy),<sup>22</sup> yet it seems as though what appealed to him were the remnants it contained of the original ballad, rather than the comic changes, since he erases completely Heine's satiric elements. Wagner's opera takes the Tannhäuser myth as it has evolved in Heine's satiric poem and attempts to turn it back into its original form as a Christian morality tale. In Wagner's hands, the folkloric elements are used to revive the German national Volk spirit<sup>23</sup> (rather than to undermine it as Heine did); Wagner "exploited the past as material for the construction of his concept of national identity."<sup>24</sup> The myths and tales of the past express the lost glory of the German people and are tools for building the present.<sup>25</sup> Unlike in the original morality tale, where Tannhäuser's redemption comes too late, in Wagner's reworking of the myth Tannhäuser achieves his redemption and may now enter heaven. He becomes a figure of glory, tempted yet in the end able to transcend his desire. The myth has thus gone from a Christian

morality tale (the original) to a comic secular tale (with Heine), and back to a serious Christian morality tale with a positive ending.

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Theodor Herzl was deeply inspired by Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. He went to numerous performances and even wrote a feuilleton about a production of it for the *Neue Freie Presse*.<sup>26</sup> He stated that it was his favorite music for relaxation when he wrote *Der Judenstaat* (The State of the Jews).<sup>27</sup> *Tannhäuser* not only appealed to him for its ability to help him relax but inspired him with its pageantry:

In the evening, *Tannhäuser* at the Opera. We too will have such splendid auditoriums—the gentlemen in full dress, the ladies dressed as lavishly as possible. Yet, I want to make use of the Jewish love of luxury, in addition to all other resources. This again made me think of the phenomenon of the crowd. There they sat for hours, tightly packed, motionless, in physical discomfort—and for what? For something imponderable, the kind that Hirsch does not understand: for sounds! For music and pictures! I shall also cultivate majestic processional marches for great festive occasions.<sup>28</sup>

The opera represented the epitome of high culture while the spectacle itself was like a drug that enraptured the masses and could, perhaps, be a force of inspiration for the Jews. Much as Wagner was using opera to create a revived German consciousness out of the current “depression,”<sup>29</sup> opera for the Jews could bring on a similar revival of spirit. Wagner had managed to exploit spectacle in the cause of German nationalism; Herzl would as well for Jewish nationalism. Herzl's attraction to Wagnerian opera may also have been an outgrowth of his youth in Vienna. The city was occasionally swept up in festivals that increasingly made Herzl aware of how pageantry could be used for political propaganda.<sup>30</sup> Herzl saw in Wagner's opera a vision of mass culture that was a model for how to construct a new Jewish society. The pageantry of *Tannhäuser* was something he would cultivate to inspire the Jewish crowd and draw them into his nationalistic rhetoric. Herzl's infatuation with the opera culminated in the 1898 Second Zionist Congress, which “opened festively to the sounds of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*.”<sup>31</sup>

*Tannhäuser* appealed so deeply to Herzl not only because it was “relaxing” for him and he found the spectacle inspiring but also because, as Steven Beller asserts, the redemptive plot of *Tannhäuser* struck a cord with Herzl:

[T]he redemption of the artist becomes an allegory of both Herzl's private crisis and that of the Jewish people as a whole. In both cases, Zionism is to be the triumph of moral idealism over the state of "moral suffering" and alienation, which is the lot of assimilated Jews in anti-Semitic Europe. Herzl thus becomes much more Elisabeth and Wolfram than he is Tannhäuser.<sup>32</sup>

Just as Elizabeth and Wolfram offer Tannhäuser the path back to "moral idealism" in the opera, so too Zionism is the path for the spiritual regeneration of the Jewish people. The opera expounds the loftiest ideas of the importance of choosing a path toward Christian morality and away from sensual individualism. Tannhäuser (and Elizabeth) die in the end, but their souls are safe. Herzl, the idealist, likely found in the opera an expression of sacrifice and devotion as tools for spiritual transcendence. The sacrifice and reward of the opera, spelled out in such a clear-cut way, may have been to Herzl a positive example of the spiritual regeneration that will come for those who follow a moral principle of self-sacrifice toward a greater cause. Moreover, for the Jewish people, assimilated into Western culture but nevertheless marginalized from truly belonging, Herzl must have found in Wagner a great example of how to use the products of culture to edify the people and unite them. If the Jews could develop such a culture, they may well be lifted out of their spiritual slump.

For a man who had spent much of his youth inspired by German nationalism<sup>33</sup> and who had joined a fraternity devoted to it, there may also have been for Herzl a residual attraction for German culture that could explain his enjoyment of its music, even if it was composed by an antisemite. After all, Wagner had been the great, popular musician to Viennese society whom Herzl and many others held in "idol worship,"<sup>34</sup> and Herzl may not have found it possible to distance his musical taste from the artist who created it. It is no wonder that an appreciation for Wagner's music may have remained strong because it was such a central aspect of his cultural identity.

The opera appealed to the audience for its focus on redemptive possibilities, its motif of the power of self-emancipation, and its service as a cultural tool to inspire the masses. Herzl's relationship with the opera was thus extremely complicated, because it spoke to him on a number of different levels. However, linking Wagner with Herzl is clearly problematic.<sup>35</sup> Wagner, inspired by the Volkgeist of the Germans, saw the Jews as antithetical to the culture he was propagating in his music. Herzl, focusing on developing a Jewish political national consciousness, was attracted to Wagner not for his anti-Jewish sentiment but for his genius in creating works of inspirational spectacle. Although the

fact that Herzl could be inspired by Wagner's artistry may make us uncomfortable, Herzl's decision to use the opera as a model for inspiring national cohesion reflects a basic trend in the development of Zionism of propagating tools for Jewish regeneration. Of course Herzl did not use Wagner to hurt the Jews but to better them, as he saw it.

The Tannhäuser myth evolves in an interesting way with Herzl. Wagner had sought a return to the original medieval form of the ballad and a move away from Heine's subversive, comedic elements; Herzl, too, uses Tannhäuser in a serious mode. In Wagner's opera, the folkloric elements are inspirational. The folkloric imperative remains the same with Herzl, but, in his case, the redemptive motif of Tannhäuser is a model for Jewish cohesion. Tannhäuser becomes both a universal symbol for Herzl of how to culturally use folklore (for spectacle) and an example of the best type of folkloric content to inspire national cohesion (redemptive motifs). Thus Herzl, like Wagner, uses Tannhäuser as a source of national inspiration. Yet he sabotages the Wagnerian edict by using it to inspire the Jews.

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### I. L. Peretz

The culmination of the evolution of the Tannhäuser ballad occurred in 1904 when the Yiddish writer I. L. Peretz published a loose adaptation of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* entitled "Mesires- nefesh."<sup>36</sup> It is not strange that Peretz turned to a European model for his work—according to Ken Frieden, the tradition of turning to European models was one of Peretz's greatest contributions to Yiddish literature<sup>37</sup>—but what is strange is that the model came from Wagner. In the case of Peretz, a man proudly Jewish, Wagner was likely someone whose antisemitism could not be ignored. For Peretz, a Jewish nationalist (not in the sense of Zionist but in the sense of a proud Jew), in order to work with Wagner's original it would likely have been necessary to sabotage it somehow. Peretz thus takes *Tannhäuser*, authored by one of the most prominent antisemites of the nineteenth century, and transforms it into a peon to Judaic life and learning.

The plot of "Mesires- nefesh" is as follows. In Safed, the center of Jewish mysticism in the post-exilic era, the heavenly Sarah is married to the businessman Reb Hiya who always helps the poor and is a "spokesman" for the Jews (34). When Sarah dies, Reb Hiya decides to sell his belongings and turn his palace into a yeshivah where he teaches his students to study Torah for its own sake rather than for material rewards or for vanity. Reb Hiya listens to his students to discern who has



the voice, sent from heaven, that will show his pure soul and make him a suitable groom for his daughter Miriam.

A young man, Hananyah, arrives in a penitent's outfit with staff in hand and reluctantly shares his story with Reb Hiya. His mother had spoiled him and made him vain and arrogant about his learning to such an extent that he abused others by using his knowledge to show off and to put them down for their ignorance. Eventually, Hananyah had decided to repent his prideful and empty ways, yet at a wedding party he could not help but publicly humiliate the bridegroom by showing how unlearned his speech was. Afterward, the yeshivah head cursed him to forget all his learning, so Hananyah adopted the bridegroom's discarded penitent's clothing and staff. The rabbi told him he must become a wanderer, and, when the staff bloomed, he would remember his learning. In the desert, Hananyah had a vision that the head of the yeshivah (that cursed him) told him to go to Safed to join the yeshivah there, whose leader would find a wife for him, adding that "on the eighth day after the wedding, you will awaken in the morning and you will find the staff at the head of your bed blossoming and sprouting almonds. Then your soul too will blossom and sprout" (74).

The narrative then returns to Hananyah at the yeshivah in Safed. Hananyah, who loves "Torah for its own sake," becomes an extremely studious and humble student of the yeshivah. Soon Reb Hiya overhears two snakes discussing how one intends to fatally bite Hananyah on the eighth day after his wedding. Although deeply troubled about sacrificing his daughter Miriam to a man who will die after the wedding, the father nevertheless allows her to marry her beloved. On the seventh day of the wedding, the staff begins to blossom. While Hananyah is revealing the mysteries of Torah to Miriam's delighted father, she dresses up like Hananyah to trick the snake into killing her instead of her husband. She dies, and in heaven the hosts are appalled at the mistake and order her back so they can take the correct one, her husband. She refuses and only agrees to return to earth if they will not kill him. They agree, and she returns to her body and reunites with Hananyah. All is perfect. Miriam and Hananyah give birth to a "great luminary" (108) and live happily ever after.

Peretz Judaizes Wagner's version completely: setting it in a Jewish space (Safed in Erets Israel), making every character Jewish, and asserting Jewish cultural beliefs. In fact, at first glance Peretz's rewrite seems so distant from Wagner's German medieval original that the question arises if this is an adaptation at all. To uncover the ties took some detective work, but I now believe that "Mesires-nefesh" is a loose adaptation of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. The evidence for the connection is described below.

## Historical Affinity

The question remains, of course, whether Peretz was aware of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. Although the opera and many reworkings of it were circulating at the time,<sup>38</sup> was there documentation that Peretz had seen it? A citation in Ruth Wisse's book *I. L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*<sup>39</sup> led me to Nahman Sokolow's *Perzenlekhkeytn*, in which he states that he ran into Peretz at a performance of *Tannhäuser* in Warsaw.<sup>40</sup>

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## Plot

The similarities in plot are numerous:

1. In both, the main story is of a young man seeking redemption from his fall. In Peretz's case, the fall comes about in the pursuit of knowledge, rather than from physical love as in Wagner. In each, redemption arrives by the protagonist's beloved.

2. Both are set in a mythic, archetypal past, as was typical in both Wagner and many of Peretz's tales of the time. In Wagner it is medieval Germany of the European romance. Peretz's "Mesires-nefesh," also a romance, is set in post-exilic Erets Israel.

3. A woman leads to the downfall of both men. However, in Peretz's version, the sexual relationship is downplayed. As Sol Liptzin has noted, "to a Jewish narrator writing for a Jewish audience, this entire problem, the conflict between asceticism or heavenly love and Venus or earthly love was largely devoid of meaning."<sup>41</sup> Instead, the paradigm of devotion shifts from earthly love to Torah love, and the woman leading to the protagonist's downfall is not the sexual Venus but the protagonist Hananyah's mother! It is a story of an overbearing Jewish mother and her weak, coddled son (intentionally or not playing into one of the most persistent Jewish stereotypes). The mother "seduces" her son with constant admiration and spoiling (like Venus with *Tannhäuser* in Wagner's opera) and makes him stagnate intellectually and morally (again like Venus with *Tannhäuser*). To reflect a society where physical love is not discussed in literature, Peretz adapts *Tannhäuser* into a story of mother/son love gone awry.

4. In both versions, the young man finally breaks free of the seductress and seeks redemption from his sins. In *Tannhäuser*, it is sought from the pope, who refuses to absolve him and instead curses him. Peretz offers a more layered description of the search for redemption by making the "pope" two characters instead of one: the yeshivah head who curses him, and Reb Hiya who offers him guidance for his spiritual renewal. In the Catholic schema, penitence comes through a

priest or pope. In the Jewish schema, where rabbis are no closer to God than the average person, the redemption cannot be granted, as in the confessional, but must be actively internalized through changed actions in the world. Thus, by his own active pursuit of true knowledge, Hananyah gains what Wagner's Tannhäuser cannot be granted from the pope: a return to the true path.

5. The role of women in both is to guide the men, either for bad, as with Venus in *Tannhäuser* and the mother in "Mesires-nefesh," or for good, as with Tannhäuser's Elizabeth and Hananyah's Miriam. Whereas men can have an independent self that focuses on a variety of things (sex, learning, business), the women in both tales exist entirely in relationship to the male characters. The protagonists, Tannhäuser and Hananyah, are intellectually and morally weak, and their personalities are under the influence of women. Their final redemption comes at the hands of the women they love, who hold a power beyond that of the pope in *Tannhäuser* and the rabbi in "Mesires-nefesh"—neither of whom in the end are able to sway the heavens in the way the women do.

6. In both works, the protagonist "falls" in a public setting. In Wagner, Tannhäuser humiliates himself at a singing contest with a song of pagan love, thus manifesting to the world at large that, although he has left Venus's realm, he is still under her sway. In Peretz, the singing contest becomes a speech at a wedding party, where Hananyah is unable to control his vanity and launches into a nasty assault on the bridegroom's lowly learning in comparison to his own brilliance. In both cases, the protagonist thinks he has broken free of his fallen state, yet in a humiliating public display shows that he has not evolved. In Peretz, the "fallen" voice is not lusty or sexual, as in *Tannhäuser*, but pedantic, reflecting the utterly different focus of the works—from Wagner's Western, romantic notion of love as a key motif in the individual search for redemption, to Peretz's Judaic notion of learning as the key component of mature male identity.

7. Both tales end with the staff blooming to show the protagonist's redemption (which has been brought about by the sacrifice of the woman he loves). In Wagner, it shows that Tannhäuser has renounced pagan love for Catholic, virtuous love; in Peretz, that Hananyah has renounced boastful learning for true knowledge.

### ***Symbolism***

The most convincing proof of the connection is the use of the same central symbol in each work: the flowering staff as a sign of redemption. It is an image that shows up in Christian iconography<sup>42</sup> but, as a sign of re-

demption, it is tied directly in folkloric iconography with Tannhäuser. In Jewish iconography, the flowering staff does show up in the 1602 *Maaseh bukh*.<sup>43</sup> Yet in that case, though the flowering staff represents the moment of redemption of the fallen, it is also used to show that Reb Judah makes a hasty decision in asserting the sin of the downfallen. This is the same way the blooming staff works in the medieval legend it is based on, when it shows that the pope has judged Tannhäuser too hastily. Although it is possible the *Maaseh bukh* may have influenced Peretz, the way he uses the flowering staff in “Mesires-nefesh” replicates Wagner’s opera rather than the *Maaseh bukh*. The blooming staff does show up as an image in other instances in Jewish iconography (as Rella Kushelevsky has shown), but the staff used specifically as an image of the soul’s redemption is found in only a few cases.<sup>44</sup> The fact that Peretz attended the opera to which his story bears such an overwhelming resemblance makes clear that the blooming staff originated with Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*.

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### *Peretz’s Vision*

These three “proofs”—historical affinity, plot, and symbolism—together show the tie between the two works and support the idea that Peretz’s “Mesires-nefesh” was influenced by Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*.

While being influenced by Wagner, Peretz reworked the story to match his unique vision. Foremost among the changes in the Peretz framework is that paganism, so central to Wagner’s portrayal of Tannhäuser’s seduction by Venus, does not play any role whatsoever. Instead, the binary of paganism/Catholicism becomes gradations of Jewish devotion, be it sacrificing oneself for one’s mate (the route of transcendence for women in Peretz) or sacrifice for learning (the means of male transcendence).<sup>45</sup> The other divergences include the following: the plot in Peretz is much more sophisticated and complicated than in Wagner, and the endings are different—Tannhäuser dies, whereas Hananyah lives.

The simplicity of the plot in Wagner—there is only one narrative—reflects that this is an opera rather than a short story: the lyricist needs to keep the plot simple so that the audience will not get lost. Peretz, free of this need, makes his plot extremely complicated and the narrative style highly sophisticated. Whereas Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* begins with the knight in the Venusberg, Peretz takes some narrative time, and the introduction of many characters, for the story to arrive at the protagonist’s tale. The plot thus begins a generation before the story of Hananyah, with the grandparents of Hananyah’s wife Miriam. Their story establishes the “kingly stock” of the lineage from which Hananyah’s son

will generate. (The tie between the kingly in Peretz and the knightly in *Tannhäuser* makes both tales legends.) Interestingly, the framing narrative is about Miriam, the wife, rather than Hananyah, the protagonist. In contrast, in Wagner we get virtually nothing of Elizabeth's background or story.<sup>46</sup> Miriam's heritage teaches us how she has become so good (she comes from kingly, virtuous stock and a line of extremely devoted and loving parents). The explanation humanizes her and makes her much less archetypal than Wagner's Elizabeth.

Peretz shows us the path of the fallen (overly indulgent parenting) and equally the path of the risen (loving, not overly indulgent parenting). Peretz's version thus teaches the readers how to be good parents, how to be good individuals, and how to be good Jews, whereas in Wagner the mythic-like narrative, and the extreme yet often unexplained "black and white" actions of the characters, negate a subtle reading. In Peretz, fall and redemption are described in a humanistic schema where they are influenced by family, culture, and religion, in contrast to Wagner's opera, where fall and redemption reflect singularly Christian notions of sin and virtue. Peretz adds the family dynamics—and the psychology—that is negated in Wagner's spectacle-focused opera.

The endings of both works are different. *Tannhäuser* dies yet has his soul redeemed by God; Hananyah lives and saves his own soul. As Liptzin rightly notes, the shifted ending points to the differences between Jewish and Christian concepts of death and the afterlife:

An early death is also foretold for Hananya and yet, were this destiny fulfilled, the whole tale would not be meaningful from the viewpoint of Jewish tradition. The Christian's striving is to escape this world and its bonds. The greatest reward for the penitent is to be received, purged of sin, in the realm beyond death. The Jew, however, strives for knowledge in this world, so that he may live more fully here and now. . . . Hananya must, therefore, be redeemed from ignorance and spiritual night, but not at the cost of death.<sup>47</sup>

*Tannhäuser* can live "happily ever after" in the heavenly realm, whereas in Peretz, matching Jewish concepts, the earthly realm is the only space for this. In fact, the heavenly realm as a sanctified space is often a comedic area in Yiddish literature, from Peretz's 1894 short story "Bontshe Shvayg" to Itzik Manger's 1939 *Dos Bukh fun gan-eydn* (The Book of Paradise), and as a setting it subverts the sanctity of Christian readings of heaven. So Peretz must literally bring the conclusion "down to earth."

Liptzin asserts that Miriam's attempt at self-sacrifice is tied to Euripides' *Alcestis*.<sup>48</sup> It is true Peretz might have been aware of the myth, although it seems unlikely. I believe it is more probable that the source was Wag-

ner's 1843 opera *The Flying Dutchman*, which climaxes with a woman, Senta, sacrificing her life for her beloved Dutchman. Her sacrifice proves her loyalty and devotion to him; thus, after throwing herself off a cliff into the ocean, she rises and ascends toward heaven in the arms of the Dutchman. Through her sacrifice, the Dutchman is redeemed from his endless wandering, and the two can now remain together forever in heaven. (It is interesting to note that Heine's version of "The Flying Dutchman" influenced Wagner's opera<sup>49</sup>—as had Heine's version of *Tannhäuser*.) Peretz may well have been conflating these two operas, taking the theme of self-sacrifice from the *Flying Dutchman* and the theme of sin and redemption from *Tannhäuser*.

What are we to make of Peretz's appropriation of one or two of Wagner's operas? Intentionally or not, Peretz completely subverts the romantic, Germanic work of a prominent antisemite and turns it so completely around that his story becomes an ode to the importance of Jewish learning and a well-lived Jewish life. His intention in transforming the original may have been to distance "Mesires-nefesh" from Wagner's work. Thus, on first reading, it hardly seems a version of *Tannhäuser* but instead a neo-romantic Jewish myth about learning for its own sake. It makes sense, then, that the central visual icon of the opera—the budding staff—becomes a central motif in Peretz's work, because if the original is something only seen once, then the adaptation would be more likely to adopt visual aspects than anything else.

Did Peretz make his adaptation so loose to distance it from Wagner, or was it done unintentionally? The opera may have sparked some ideas, as did myriad other things, and it may have been one of many catalysts for the story. However, if the adaptation was loose either to distance it from Wagner or as a subconscious appropriation, how to explain the *Tannhäuserian* blooming staff, the singing/speech event, the deep similarities in plot? At a time when there were numerous versions of *Tannhäuser* being produced and published,<sup>50</sup> Peretz must have known that some of the readers would make a connection between the two. So, again we return to the question of what was the point of adapting a narrative from Wagner, whom for many Jews was first and foremost an antisemite?

Perhaps Peretz intentionally subverted Wagner in essence to say "I, as a Jewish writer, have taken the most German of myths and turned it into something that shows the virtues of Jewish learning. In the act of literary adaptation, the antisemite's works can be used against him to show the virtues of the Jewish in place of the Germanic." Yet the problem with this interpretation is that, while Peretz took enough of *Tannhäuser* to draw a connection, he did not take enough to make it an

outright subversion. If he had intended it to be one, he would probably have made the parallels more obvious to show that his work was based on subverting and Judaizing Wagner's original. The ties are too loose for this, and, more than likely, if it were an overt subversive rewrite it would have employed satiric elements—a commonplace tool in Jewish literary subversion.

Instead, I would suggest that Peretz's rewrite lies somewhere in the middle between an attempt to tie his work closely to the original and overtly subvert it, and a desire to distance himself from it. I imagine his reasoning was something like the following: "The whole artistic terrain is a field that can be appropriated by the artist. As a writer, I have the freedom to pick and choose the motifs that work for me, be they from German elements or from Jewish ones. As a folklorist, what appeals to me are the symbols and myths of folklore, such as the budding staff. It does not matter what I choose to pick from; what matters is what I do with it—that I create a Judaically empowering literature. Yes, Wagner is an antisemite, but *Tannhäuser* is not about Wagner but about Germanic folklore. It is from this, and the archetypal motifs it offers, that I am inspired to write my story. In this case, the art has transcended the artist."<sup>51</sup>

The decision of a "proud" Jew like Peretz to base a story on Wagner's opus outlines how the folkloric imperative can enable a bifurcation between the art and the artist. The folklore iconography of the blooming staff as redemptive is dissociated from its source in a German myth on Catholic virtue, and it becomes for Peretz something to appropriate into a Jewish context. The transcendability of the culturally symbolic motif expresses a romantic notion of the artistic imperative. It is interesting to note that, whereas Heine, deeply attached to Germany, used the *Tannhäuser* myth to satirize Germany and thus to politicize the romantic impulse, Peretz did the opposite by taking a politically relevant source—the work of an antisemite—to romanticize it into a pure, depoliticized symbol of redemption.

The evolution of *Tannhäuser* has gone full circle in Peretz's story. From a medieval ballad about Catholic redemption, through Heine's subversion and Wagner's reconstitution as a nationalistic tale, Peretz's story returns the tale to its original form as a medieval story about redemption, but in this case it is Jewish rather than Catholic redemption.

## Conclusion

This article reiterates the importance of studying cultures in the context of the surrounding historical and social environment, rather than

in isolation, because culture is produced and developed through interactive moments. Jews have always lived, intermingled, and been influenced by the environments in which they live. The analysis of *Tannhäuser* has helped to show the evolution of an outside source as it culturally interfaces with the Jewish environment. The use made of it has been both artistic and ideational as a tool to subvert, to sabotage, to nationalize, to empower. *Tannhäuser* has been so successfully replicated in Jewish life because its motif of sin and redemption is open to being translated into different contexts: a secular quest, the Jewish struggle for national unity, the individual Jew's search for knowledge.

The evolution of *Tannhäuser* goes from the medieval ballad, to Heine, to Wagner, and then to Herzl and Peretz. Each of the figures choose *Tannhäuser* for different reasons. For Heine, the romantic impulse that leads him to the medieval German legend transmutes into a satiric subversion of the text. For Herzl, his attachment to the opera may have been a combination of a residual yet understandable tie to Wagner's music, an attraction to the spectacle of the opera, and his being inspired by its tale of self-redemption as a parable for the Zionist cause. For Peretz, even though the fertile, creative terrain was generated through the medium of Wagner, he could pick and choose aspects that were useful for his artistry.

It is uncomfortable, certainly, to see how Wagner played a role in the work of Jewish cultural heroes such as Herzl and Peretz. Yet, in the end, what I find most interesting is not that they used Wagner's opera but what they did with it. Beginning with Heine, we have a German Jewish poet using a nationalistic German myth to satirize the culture that produced it. For Herzl, Wagner's opera became another tool to discover how to boldly nationalize the Jews by means of spectacle and a model for inspiring cultural redemption. The artistry of Wagner, the antisemite, was used to embolden the Jews. For Peretz, the opera was transformed into a manifesto on being Judaically empowered both intellectually and spiritually. This creative repositioning, where the work of an antisemite becomes retooled to have a positive cultural impact, bespeaks the manner in which Jewish thinkers and writers have often used the cultural products of the broader society to strengthen and re-fashion the Jewish milieu.

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*Tannhäuser*



Leah Garrett



## Notes

[50]  
Jewish  
Social  
Studies

- 1 See Dov Sadan's article "Mateh Aharon ve-tseetsaav," in his *Bein sheilah le-kinyan* (Tel Aviv, 1968), 173–82.
- 2 For a study of this phenomenon, see Nancy Harrowitz, *Tainted Greatness: Antisemitism and Cultural Heroes* (Philadelphia, 1994).
- 3 The fifteenth-century, earliest extant version of the Tannhäuser ballad is translated into English in J. M. Clifton-Everest, *The Tragedy of Knighthood* (Oxford, 1979), 144–49.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 148–49.
- 5 Heinrich Heine, "Tannhäuser: A Legend," in *The Poetry and Prose of Heinrich Heine*, ed. Frederic Ewen, trans. Emma Lazarus and Aaron Kramer (New York, 1948), 119–26. The original German version is found in *Heinrich Heines Samtliche Werke*, vol. 1, ed. Ernst Elster (Leipzig, 1890), 245–52.
- 6 S. S. Praver, *Heine the Tragic Satirist: A Study of the Later Poetry 1827–1856* (Cambridge, Engl., 1961), 39.
- 7 Heine, "Tannhäuser," 125.
- 8 Laura Hofrichter, *Heinrich Heine*, trans. Barker Fairley (Oxford, 1963), 85.
- 9 Praver, *Heine the Tragic Satirist*, 40.
- 10 Jeffrey L. Sammons, *Heinrich Heine: The Elusive Poet* (New Haven, Conn., 1969), 197.
- 11 Praver, *Heine the Tragic Satirist*, 45.
- 12 Jeffrey L. Sammons, *Heinrich Heine: A Modern Biography* (Princeton, N.J., 1979), 194.
- Heine's attachment to Germany was very complicated during the period when he wrote "Der Tannhäuser"; he sought to balance his tie to the country with problems he saw in its romantic attachment to its grand past. See *ibid.*, 188–89.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 189.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 See Praver, *Heine the Tragic Satirist*, 45–46; Sammons, *Heine: The Elusive Poet*, 197; and Hofrichter, *Heinrich Heine* 86.
- 16 In *Heinrich Heines Samtliche Werke*, vol. 4, ed. Ernst Elster (Leipzig, 1890), 305.
- 17 There are four different versions of the work. My discussion is based on the first version of 1845. For a list of the versions, see *Wagner and His Operas*, ed. Stanley Sadie (New York, 2000), 53.
- 18 Translation from Metropolitan Opera House, *Tannhäuser: Grand Romantic Opera in Three Acts* by Richard Wagner (New York, n.d.), 28–29; the translator's name is not given.
- 19 Sadie, ed., *Wagner and His Operas*, 52.
- 20 Jacob Katz, *The Darker Side of Genius: Richard Wagner's Anti-Semitism* (Hanover, N.H., 1986), 26.
- 21 Paul Lawrence Rose, *Wagner: Race and Revolution* (New Haven, Conn., 1992), 32–33. For a consideration of Wagner's treatment of Heine, see Katz, *The Darker Side of Genius*, 26–27, 43–44. Katz shows that Wagner's treatment of Heine, though antisemitic, was nevertheless some-

- what ambiguous because he admired Heine's poetry.
- 22 Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge, Engl., 1971), 22.
- 23 For a discussion of Wagner and the Volk, see Barry Millington, *Wagner* (London, 1984), 43.
- 24 For a cogent analysis of how Wagner used his art to help the Germans find their "noble" spirit, see Hannu Salmi, *Imagined Germany: Richard Wagner's National Utopia* (New York, 1999). The quote from the text is on p. 34. Salmi's analysis focuses on Wagner's work after 1865, but he implies that the nationalism Wagner developed then was rooted in the earlier years.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 26 Steven Beller, "Herzl's Tannhäuser: The Redemption of the Artist as Politician," in *Austrians and Jews in the Twentieth Century: From Franz Joseph to Waldheim*, Robert S. Wistrich, ed. (London, 1992), 51.
- 27 Theodor Herzl, *Zionistische Schriften*, ed. Leon Kellner (Berlin, 1920), 9.
- 28 *The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, vol. 1, ed. Raphael Patai, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1960), 33.
- 29 Salmi, *Imagined Germany*, 33.
- 30 Amos Elon, *Herzl* (New York, 1975), 37.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 259.
- 32 Beller, "Herzl's Tannhäuser," 53.
- 33 Elon, *Herzl*, 53.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 44.
- 35 Beller discusses this in detail in "Herzl's Tannhäuser."
- 36 The full Yiddish original, along with an English translation, can be found in Sol Liptzin, *Peretz* (New York, 1947), 30–109. (Hereafter, the page numbers of quotes from this work are given in parentheses in the text.) There is also an English translation entitled "Devotion Without End" in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, ed. and trans. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York, 1990), 118–48.
- 37 Ken Frieden, *Classic Yiddish Fiction: Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz* (Albany, N.Y., 1995), 232, 241.
- 38 J. W. Thomas, *Tannhäuser: Poet and Legend with Texts and Translations of His Works* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1974), 83.
- 39 Ruth Wisse, *I. L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Seattle, 1991), 122–23 n.21.
- 40 Nahman Sokolow, *Perzenlekhkeytn* (Buenos Aires, 1948), 171.
- 41 Liptzin, *Peretz*, 25.
- 42 For a consideration of the budding staff in Christian iconography, see George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (Oxford, 1961), 73, 127. For a general study of the budding staff, see James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, vol. 1, (New York, 1960), esp. chap. 68.
- 43 The story "Reb Judah Hasid and the Apostate" is not included in the Yiddish reprint, *Mayse-bukh*, ed. Shemuel Rozshanski (Buenos Aires, 1969), but can be found in the English translation entitled *Maaseh Book: Book of Jewish Tales and Legends*, vol. 2, trans. Moses Gaster (Philadelphia, 1934), 380–83. The story

- can also be found in the Judeo-German edition, adapted from the 1723 Amsterdam edition of the *Maysø-bukh*, entitled *Maasse-Buch: Buch der Sagen und Legenden aus Talmud und nebst Volkserzählungen in judisch-deutscher Sprache*, ed. Bertha Pappenheim (Frankfurt, 1929), 190–93.
- 44 See Rella Kushelevsky, “Hamehah ha-poreah-iyun ba-ikaron ha-mkhonen shel ha-sidrah hahematit,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 13/14 (1991–92).
- 45 David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 131, 128.
- 46 However, Michael Tanner points out that, though Elizabeth starts out as quite an interesting character, she becomes less so in direct proportion to Tannhäuser developing a more interesting personality. See Tanner, *Wagner* (Princeton, N.J., 1996), 78.
- 47 Liptzin, *Peretz*, 26–27.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 49 Sammons, *Heine: A Modern Biography*, 186.
- 50 Thomas, *Tannhäuser*, 83.
- 51 For an analysis of Peretz’s interest in Jewish folklore, see Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*, 114–43.