

In the final scene of Israel Aksenfeld's *Dos Shterntikhl*, the reader is presented with a theatrical grand finale of reversals and recognition that is typical of the comedy of errors and traditional romance genres. Mikhl, the novel's maskilic hero, is not only able to orchestrate his own marriage to his paramour Sheyntze, as well as a reunion between other characters in the novel, but he likewise calls an end to the deception of his ideological opponents, as he professes a specific moral or higher enlightened "truth" to the reader. The financially productive and rational young maskil uncovers the economic and social backwardness of the shtetl, which is perpetuated by the lies, dubious pecuniary transactions and theatrical antics of the leaders and followers of Hasidism. Yet, what is particularly striking about this climactic moment of anagnorisis, and what distinguishes it from many other similar scenes found throughout the Yiddish and Hebrew literature of the Haskalah,¹ is that following Mikhl's marriage to Shayntze, and after all of the masks have been removed from the various characters, the novel ends with yet another act of deception. The higher maskilic moral or truth is not entirely self-evident, but must be explained in a final, secret dialogue between Mikhl and his recently discovered "real" father-in-law. Mikhl reveals that the shterntikhl he has procured for his wife, and which has won him his new found respect and socio-economic status within the shtetl, is made of false pearls. It becomes clear that 'truth' has not won out over 'falsehood,' but rather the right kind of falsehood has been victorious. The novel's hero has therefore employed the same deceptive and theatrical tactics as its villains, and the real moral of the story is only evident when the father-in-law/reader is asked to differentiate

¹Miron classifies the ending of *Dos Shterntikhl* as following a well known pattern of such climactic scenes in Haskalah literature. He likens the ending both to Etinger's *Serkele* and Mapu's *Ayit Tsavua*. (103:1973)

between the two different kinds of falsehood, as Mikhl raises his voice and exclaims:

“I am not a crook,” or in his own words:

...איך בין, הס ושלום, ניט קיין שווינדלער... (188).

The fact that the end of the novel introduces yet another act of deception, and therefore the need for further clarification – that is only disclosed to a single, peripheral character – leads to a series of problematic moral questions. While much of the novel presents a critique of traditional arranged marriages, which tend to benefit the economic and/or social interests of third-parties at the expense of “true love,” the text simultaneously asks what kind of romantic, ideal love can be predicated on deception, on a set of false pearls that the wife herself can not distinguish from real ones? Can, as Machiavelli would have it, the ends truly justify the means? And what kind of maskilic hero is this, who must take the time to interrupt the narrative’s denouement in order to explain himself, and to declare his own innocence and moral integrity?

On the one hand, Dan Miron has accounted for many of these ostensible “inconsistencies” or interpretive difficulties in his reading of the text. After a close reading of the novel’s central symbol of the shterntikhl, which he argues represents the “frozen” and static economy of feudal society in contrast to the flow of currency of the free market, he concludes that Mikhl’s final fraudulent act implies the victory of reason over the outmoded and irrational system epitomized by the shterntikhl itself:

מכאן משתמע גם ערך הסמלי הגדול של מעשה זיופו, המתגלה כנצחון הראציונאליזם בדרכי-רמייה, כהגברה ערמומית של עקרון המציאות על סמלים שעבר זמנם (199).

In other words, by opting for false pearls instead of real ones for his fiancée’s

shterntikhl, the “myth” of this outmoded female garment and its symbolic power over the shtetl is deconstructed or “פוצץ מתוכו,” as the false pearls come to underscore the falsity and hollowness of the very system they represent. According to this line of reasoning, the fact that Sheyntze is duped along with the rest of the shtetl is morally justified, because she herself has been under its spell. Since her desire for a large shterntikhl has motivated many of her actions throughout the novel, her ultimate deception may be understood as ethically (if not karma-ically) warranted. In fact, as Miron explains, Mikhl’s ultimate act of dissimulation, where he manages to trick an entire shtetl, is precisely what makes him the ‘true’ hero:

wow!

[השטערנטיקל] הוא הרוח הרעה, הדיבוק של [הרומאן]. מיכל מגסה לגרש את הדיבוק והוא כמין 'צדיק' קאפיטאליסטי -- קוסם, איש-תככים, רמאי ממולח, סוחר, שחקן, מורה מתקן עולם. אקסנפלד סולח ברצון את עוון 'צדיקותו' המזויפת ואף מחבב אותו בגללה. הריהי כולה מכוונת לגירוש ה'דיבוק' השביסי-חסידי מגוף האומה ולהשכנת הרוח החיה של המסחר הראציונאלי בו תחתיו. בעולם הערכים של אקסנפלד לא תיתכן כוונה כשרה מזו (216).

What is particularly striking about Miron’s reading is that, like the novel itself, it ends with the problem of exonerating or “pardoning” the hero. And, while such a reading does account for the novel’s main lesson, or purported ‘message,’ I believe that the source of the moral tension in the story between truth and falsehood lies elsewhere. While Miron briefly points to the anti-feminist thrust of the novel, where a specifically *feminine* accessory that is coveted by women becomes the symbol of the backwardness and irrationality embedded in the shtetl’s embrace of feudalism (and Hasidism), a closer look at the category of gender, and the way male and female characters are constructed, may uncover a primary, if not the ‘real’ source of anxiety that fuels the novel’s events. Moreover, exploring how gendered symbols come to signify may provide a more nuanced analysis of the ambiguity and ambivalence of the unsettling final scene that culminates with the symbol of the false pearls. For, as I

will illustrate, the overall “movement” of the novel, that marks the transition of the shterntikhl from a feminine symbol of economic and social backwardness, to a masculine symbol of progress, likewise witnesses its metamorphosis into that which is false. In other words, the way the shterntikhl is transformed into a masculine (phallic) symbol containing false pearls, not only calls into question the hero’s masculinity and male power/virility, but points to a deeper anxiety that is bound up in the very social and economic reforms that the novel is ostensibly advocating. For the desire to “remove the shterntikhl from the body of the people,” simultaneously raises the issue of what will happen once it is in fact removed; i.e. what the very act of disclosure will expose. Since the shterntikhl is not just an economic symbol, but first and foremost one that helps to enforce proscribed gender roles, once this literal and symbolic object is done away with, so too are the norms, values and gender assumptions it safeguards. The act of removing such traditional barriers entails the redefining and reassigning of gender roles, and I will argue that the social ambiguity that arises from such a reassignment, and the way in which this ambiguity is inextricably linked to the free-market economy, is what leads to the novel’s sense of moral anxiety, and its questionable maskilic hero.



While the symbol of the shterntikhl is central to the novel as a whole, and what connects its various sections thematically, it also functions as part of a larger theatrical motif that includes both men’s and women’s clothing and the act of “dressing up.” Even before the shterntikhl enters the narrative, the reader is introduced to Mikhl by means of a “head to toe” run-down of the hero’s attire:

מיכל המצבה, א שיינער יונג פון א יאר צוואנציק, מיט געקרייזלטע פאות, תמיד הארט פונעם צוואגן מיט ביר, גאנצע שיד מיט שפיצן, און זאקן ביז אין דער העלפט פאדעם, ווייטער אראפ פון באנוול, אין לייונטענע פלודערן מיט געלע בענדלעך, אין א בלויען קיטאיאווענעם ארבע-כנפות, מיט א קעלנערל פארן האלדז, א קאפטאניק מיט העקעלעך (ניט מיט סטראקעס), און

שטארק צוגעגארטלט מיט א שווארצן גארטל, א הויכן ספאדעק מיט א ריינער פליישענער יארמלקע. דאס אין גאנצן האט געהייסן מיכל בעלפער (27).

This passage begins with Mikhl's alliterative nickname "Mikhl Matzayva," (literally Mikhl Gravestone), which already presents the maskilic hero in an ambivalent light, as it blends together his strikingly erect "maskilic" posture with a symbol associated with death. While it is clear that the nickname is assigned to him from without in a mocking tone – by the very provincial townspeople that the novel is criticizing – the image of the gravestone simultaneously suggests the very notion of economic and social stasis that characterizes the novel's critique of the shtertikhl. The fact that Mikhl leaves the shtetl and acquires a new alliterative nickname, Mikhl the Muscovite, to match his increasing productivity, suggests that such economic and social progress can only be accomplished by leaving the confines of this traditional, backwards environment.

However, perhaps the most startling aspect of the passage cited above describing Mikhl's attire is that it defies the rules of grammar; it is essentially one long sentence fragment that connects a series of nouns and adjectives while lacking a verb. On the one hand, this "ungrammaticality" may imply a kind of literary carelessness that is present in the sections of text featuring 'narrative expositions' as opposed to dialogue. In this sense, the stilted quality of the language seems to reveal the author's/narrator's investment in and privileging of the spoken language, which however colloquial, slurred or filled with curses is at least "grammatical." In this sense, such a descriptive sentence fragment is evocative of the descriptions of characters in a play, which is underscored by the highly theatrical quality of the novel as a whole, and the way that garments take on the role of "props." Not only is the trading, disappearance and reappearance of the shtertikhl a way of marking the

development of the novel, but at the end of the novel, the characters' clothing literally takes on a life of its own. The final "chase" for one of the villains (an errant husband who has left his wife an agunah), represents a kind of literalized pun on the "clothing wars" between the maskilim and members of traditional society. At first the Hasidim are unable to catch the villain because of their impractical slippers, yet the villain himself is ultimately caught in a doorway unable to move due to his ridiculous pants. This in turn enables the properly dressed maskil to capture him and "save the day."

Yet, embedded within the ungrammatical description of Mikhl's attire lies another interpretive possibility. The attention to detail, where each garment is described down to its most minute part, (i.e. the thread stitching his stockings together, his crispy beer soaked hair, the points on his shoes, etc.) corresponds conversely to the inattention to grammar, as the passage is literally carried away by what it describes. The emphasis on discrete objects/garments, and how they come to define a self, where Mikhl's identity is summed up through the accumulation of things, or as the narrator himself explains:

דאס אין גאנצן האט געהייסן מיכל בעלפער

implies that the "clothes make the man." It likewise introduces the central literary device of synecdoche, that aids in the novel's construction of meaning, as fragmented, detachable parts come to represent "wholes." The description of Mikhl's attire is accompanied by numerous other pictorial listings of characters' clothing, such as in the depiction of the Inn keeper and his wife, who is Sheyntze's biological mother (149). Likewise, Sheyntze herself is described (and defined) by means of garments, as her masquerade as a virtuous single woman is achieved through the attaching and detaching of braids, and her married status is attained by donning a (false) shterntikhl.

The novel's preoccupation with clothing and accessories, and the way they signify the social status and gender roles of its characters, is in a sense further emphasized by a curious scene in the novel, where characters appear naked. Once Mikhl leaves the shtetl for Breslau, he meets a contractor named Oxman, who becomes his business mentor as well as interpreter of "western," urban, middle-class culture. Mikhl's relationship to Oxman enables him to mix with other Maskilim, and leads a section of the novel where Oxman relates his own story, which stands at the structural "heart" or center of the novel. At this point, the narrative's subjectivity shifts from an omniscient third person narrator, who is at times closely aligned to Mikhl's perspective, and turns to the first person voice of this recently introduced character. Following a conversation about the moral implications and didactic potential of theater, Oxman begins his story about a swindler named Lippe Levitt, who managed to conduct a series of fraudulent business transactions with the help of a shterntikhl with false pearls that he used for collateral. This story, which provides Mikhl with the idea of switching real pearls for fake ones, is perhaps the most structurally coherent and flowing section of the text, as it becomes an entertaining first person monologue. Once Oxman introduces the figure of Lippe Levitt, whom he chances upon at an inn in Czernigov, a seemingly gratuitous, yet erotically charged and anxiety filled scene is presented to the reader along with Mikhl and a riveted audience of maskilic contractors. In this scene Oxman, after sharing Levitt's room with him at the inn, is invited to a bath house. He agrees, yet once he arrives at the bath house and disrobes, he is horrified to find that women and men are bathing together:

גייען דער באלעבאס, רב ליפע און איך. גיט ווייט הינטער דער גאס איז דער באד. פינצטער איז אין דער באד, זייער א פאסקודנע ארט זיך אויסצוטאן, נאר איך בין שוין דא, מוז מען זיך שוין אויסטאן.

ווי דערשראקן בין איך געווארן, אז איך האב אין דער חושכדיקער באד דערזען, איר וועט דאס אפשר ניט גלייבן, אזוי ווי איך האב מיינע אייגענע אויגן ניט געגלייבט: קאצאפעס מיט קאצאפקעס, נאקעטע, באדן זיך אין איינעם, דא אין דער באד...
איך בין אנטלאפן געווארן און האב מיך צוריק ווידער אנגעטאן, אהיים, צוריק אהיים אנטלאפן געווארן.

בארדיטשעווער יידן, וואס זיינען איינגעשטאנען ביי דעם אייזלען, האב איך מיט כס א פרעג געטאן:

--סטייטש, מאנסבילן באדן זיך אין איינעם מיט ווייבער הי?

--יא, הי איז אלץ אזוי. מיר זיינען שוין אזוי געווינט – ענטפערן מיר די אורחים (117).

This startling (“primal”) scene, which is perhaps the most psychologically rich and layered one in the novel, contains within it the recurring motif of dressing and undressing, and the anxiety of “exposure.” The nightmare-like imagery in this passage, which is achieved through the description of darkness, sudden horror, and the desire to flee, is exacerbated in the next scene. When Oxman returns to his room, he discovers that his personal things have been rifled with, and that several articles of his clothing are missing. In other words, the disturbing “external” hedonistic scene he witnesses, and that he views as an appalling transgression, is transformed into a very personal sense of violation.

On the level of “plot,” these highly charged psycho-sexual scenes signal to the reader, as well as to Oxman’s transfixed interlocutors, the beginning of Levitt’s underhanded business dealings. When later Oxman expresses his shock to find that Levitt has promised his shterntikhl as collateral for a debt, but leaves only a contract instead of the shterntikhl itself, Oxman explains:

געמיינט האב איך, אז ר' ליפע גיט זיי דאס שטערן-טיכל במשכון. איא, איר אלע וואלט אויך אזוי געמיינט?

איך בין נאך ערגער דערשראקן געווארן ווי פון די נאקעטע אלטע קאצאפקעס. די בינדאליק לאזט מען ביי ר' ליפע, זאל לעבן, די כתבעלע איז גענוג (122).

Oxman’s association of Levitt’s dubious transactions with the “horrific” image of the old naked women points to his moral unease and disgust. Yet the precise connection between the bath house scene and dishonest business deals is not at first clear. On the

one hand, Oxman's disgust at the image of the naked women fits both the novel's overall discomfort with sexuality, as well as its misogynistic portrayals of women. Sexuality is either omitted from the text (Shayntze's marriage to Naftali, Mikhl's rival, is never consummated), or shrouded in darkness and mystery (Sheyntze and Mikhl's private meetings in the allegedly "haunted" basement of the local tavern.) Moreover, at the end of the novel Mikhl explains how Shayntze's romantic resolve is easily swayed by the "man with the biggest shterntikhl." He takes this a step further, when he characterizes the alleged "bestiality" of (Jewish) female desire, by arguing that Shayntze's, as well as the average Jewish maiden's, longing for a big shterntikhl is so great, that she would marry even a dog who wore pearls around his neck.

Yet while there is a sense of ambivalence (if not downright hostility) regarding women's sexuality, the particular way in which this unease ties into the other ideologies promulgated in the novel helps to explain the larger moral tensions lying under the surface of the story. What is particularly interesting about Oxman's story as a whole is that it is a critique of contractors. While the rest of the novel criticizes traditional Jewish society in general, and Hasidism in particular, when the critique hits "closer to home" there is the need for a "distancing," as another character is introduced, who tells a story about another time and another place. And, again there is the need to differentiate between "good" contractors" and "bad" ones, as Levitt is described as "one of those old-fashioned [read: 'bad'] contractors." In this sense, Levitt serves as Oxman's alter-ego; he is driven by the same desire to earn money, but he is ultimately unproductive and "useless" to society. However, the attempt to differentiate between what is ethical vs. what is not in a capitalist system that is based on individualism and personal gain is especially challenging. The real difference between ethical and unethical capitalism in a sense begs the question, since it

sidesteps the question of what is really behind the free market, and if it is in fact a “moral” system. This uncertainty, which is personified in the extreme case of Levitt, who represents a “counter-model” of the capitalist, is therefore expressed in terms of gender. The “improper” kind of capitalist is associated with a lack of morality and control, as opposed to the “proper” capitalist, who still adheres to traditional standards of respectability. The scene in the bath house may then be read as a warning, by illustrating the “underside” of capitalism, and the notion of “every man for himself,” where there is no longer any respect for tradition, but just a swarm of bodies and moral chaos.

excellent

While the scene in the bath house helps to differentiate between good and bad capitalism by means of a warning, similar anxieties penetrate the larger narrative as a whole. For instance, a linear reading of the novel from beginning to end, reveals the economic and social progress of Mikhl, from his beginnings as “Mikhl Matzayva” the belfer, to the skilled and up-in-coming Mikhl the Muscovite, until his final incarnation as Yehiel the contractor (יחיאל דער פארראטשיק). The shift from a parodic Yiddish nickname to a (at least partially) Hebrew one that entails a respectable profession, illustrates his ‘positive’ development as a productive and useful citizen. His rival, Naftali, on the other hand, functions in a similar way as Levitt vis-a-vis Oxman.

Naftali is also a young man, who shows an interest in western culture and language. ✓

However, he demonstrates the limits or fringe of the Haskalah (or rather pseudo-Haskalah),² since he is not led by a belief in utility and the free market, or any other “Enlightenment ideal”, but rather spends his time drinking with Christian peasants, and loitering with Russian soldiers. His “unacceptability” is epitomized by his ultimate act of conversion. Naftali therefore symbolizes the “counter-model” of the

$$\frac{\text{Levitt}}{\text{Oxman}} = \frac{\text{Naftali}}{\text{Mikhl}}$$

maskil, who sets the parameters of acceptable behavior. His immorality therefore highlights the “ethical maskil” represented by Mikhl.

Yet while Naftali is, due to his very function, a minor character who briefly enters the novel, only to be literally taken away by the Russian authorities several pages later, the character who most reflects the anxiety inherent in the capitalistic, free-market economy is Shaynze. Shaynze appears in the first chapter in the novel, and like the shterntikhl itself, she disappears and reappears, and “changes hands” as she passes from her adoptive parents, to her biological ones, and finally to Mikhl. Likewise, her “disappearance” in the novel – both in the novel’s plot and the narrative itself – corresponds to Mikhl’s most productive, industrious activity (i.e. his time in Breslau.) And, when he reappears in Mesbez, as Yehiel the contractor, she is transformed into “Frumma,” literally “pious.” Even though “piety” has not been one of Shayntze’s noted characteristics in the beginning of the novel, it seems that the more financially productive Mikhl grows, the more pious she becomes. This equation between male productivity and female piety, which appears throughout western literature and art, exposes the means by which male anxiety in the capitalist workplace is projected onto women, who become the “guardian of men’s souls.”³ This phenomenon of the “cult of the household nun” or the “angel in the house” provides a moral framework that the new individualistic and non-traditional socio-economic climate would otherwise lack. Shayntze’s/Frumma’s newly-achieved status as a pious and moral woman, is also shared by an entirely “new” female character, Pini. If Shayntze’s disappearance from the text and detachment from economic concerns (Mikhl himself explains that she is completely ignorant of financial matters) is what

²I have borrowed this term from Feiner: 1996.

³See for instance Dijkstra: 1986; Burstyn: 1980.

allows her to remain, or become pure, then Pini represents the pinnacle of virtue. As an agunah she has spent the majority of her years alone, both cut off from the backward shtetl as well as western industrial society. Even the location of her house, which is on a "back street" or "הינטערגעסל", indicates her marginal status. And, she herself makes the connection between her relative isolation and morality with her oft repeated expression:

אליין איז די נשמה ריין (146).

Moreover, that fact that her name is evocative of the Hebrew word "פנינה" or "pearl," suggests that she herself is the "true" pearl that balances the false ones in the closing scene. Her virtue and purity are therefore what morally enables masculine productivity and even overtly unethical dealings, by easing or mediating male moral anxiety. The last words of the novel belong to her, as she recites a kind of private, spontaneous prayer that sanctions Mikhl's actions, as well as the vicissitudes of capitalist activity:

דו ביסט א גוטער, רבונג-של-עולם! דו הארט לאנג, אבער דו באצאלסט גוט... און אייך ר' יחיאל... ר' מיכל האב איך געוואלט זאגן... דאנק איך. גאט זאל אייך מיט אייער גוט, פרום ווייב געבן מזל און ברכה. איר זאלט אייך עלטערן אין עושר און אין כבוד. אמן! (195)

- 1) builds on earlier scholarship
- 2) narrative ungrammaticalities large/small
- 3) gender & capitalism - מין וואונדער
- 4) chap of dissertation

A

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January 17, 2003

Beverly Bailis on DOS SHTERNTIKHL

A superb paper, the basis for a chapter of your dissertation, I should think.

I applaud the way you build upon earlier scholarship--Miron, feminist criticism-then make it your own. I think recasting Miron's formula of בין מין וממון into a more universal discourse of feminism and capitalism goes a long way toward situating 19th-century Yiddish fiction within the world.

You pick up brilliantly on narrative ungrammaticalities, both large (the bathhouse scene) and small (description sans verb).

Most of all, I am gratified to see how much Yiddish you have under your belt in so short a space of time.