ARGUING THE MODERN JEWISH CANON
Essays on Literature and Culture
in Honor of Ruth R. Wisse

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Judging *The Judgment of Shomer*

Jewish Literature versus Jewish Reading

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When Nahum-Meir Shaykevitsh, better known as Shomer, was at the height of his popularity in 1887, a critical controversy erupted in the Yiddish press over the virtues and perils of the sentimental popular fiction that had made him a household name across Yiddish-speaking Eastern Europe. Sholem Aleichem used the dispute as fodder for *The Judgment of Shomer* (1888), an important document of early Yiddish literary criticism. This essay is intended to provide both the context of *The Judgment of Shomer* and a history of its uses and abuses in the decades following its publication. It is meant to be read in conjunction with my annotated translation of the document that is included in this volume. I begin by asking where *The Judgment* fits into Sholem Aleichem’s own development as a writer, and why he felt

My appreciation to my co-editors and Olga Litvak for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay. Some readers may benefit from first reading my translation of *The Judgment of Shomer* that follows, and then return to my discussion of it here.

1. Shomer (1846-1905) was an acronym based on letters of Shaykevitsh’s name. He began publishing his Yiddish novelettes in 1876, and by the mid-1880s he was the most productive and successful producer of mass Yiddish fiction. By the time Sholem Aleichem’s *The Judgment of Shomer* appeared in 1888, Shomer was the author of more than 50 Yiddish romances (some critics estimate the number is much higher), and by the time of his death he had published in excess of 230 Yiddish novels, 50 Yiddish plays, and several early works in Hebrew. Shomer’s novels included both historical narratives and stories set in far-off lands, in addition to works set in Eastern Europe. However, it was his sentimental fiction that secured his reputation. It featured passionate love affairs, sensational plot lines (often including murder, theft, betrayal, and other scandals), and moralistic conclusions in which good was rewarded and evil met its comeuppance. Though Shomer was read by all segments of the public, he was particularly popular among “new women readers,” whose reading habits in Yiddish shifted away from traditional didactic literature to sentimental fiction as the bonds of tradition weakened. Among such readers, Yiddish came to be associated with the pleasures of escapist fiction, whereas for maskilic (Enlightenment) writers it continued to serve a didactic purpose. See Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society* (Brandeis, 2001), 245.

2. Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916), the pen name of Sholem Rabinovitch, first published Yiddish fiction in 1885 in the newspaper *Yidishes folkshlat*. By the time of his death, and especially in the interwar period, literary historians canonized him as one of the “classic” figures of modern Yiddish literature.
the need to attack a peddler of popular sentimental fiction so forcefully. How did it establish the author's credentials among fellow Jewish intellectuals? My reading suggests that *The Judgment of Shomer* was employed strategically by Sholem Aleichem so that he could redefine the terrain of Yiddish literature on his own terms. The document reveals a young, ruthless ingénue determined to rout the competition in order to clear space for himself. As Dan Miron has argued, Sholem Aleichem's invention of a villain for this emergent vernacular literature in *The Judgment of Shomer* was intimately balanced against his careful creation of a respectable genealogy in which he cast himself as the legitimate heir, or "grandson," to S.Y. Abramovitch, whom he recognized as the "grandfather" of modern Yiddish literature. This juxtaposition of Shomer and Abramovitch was designed to introduce an intermediate category of Yiddish fiction for the masses that was neither derivative of European fiction nor elite in its aesthetic standards. In 1888, there were not yet measures in place to determine where lowbrow fiction ended and highbrow literature began. The purpose of *The Judgment of Shomer* was to establish legitimate categories and measures for Yiddish popular fiction (folks-litteratur), and to bring needed prestige to the efforts of its writers (folks-shraybers).

In the second half of this essay my attention broadens from the initial discussion of what *The Judgment of Shomer* tells us about Yiddish polemics in Sholem Aleichem's day to subsequent efforts to revisit the justice of the initial verdict among three differing groups of interwar writers and critics. My overview of their exchanges will suggest that as the fate of Yiddish shifted through the first half of the twentieth century, so too did the responses to *The Judgment of Shomer*, as subsequent literary figures reengaged with it to express their competing ideological, aesthetic, or cultural agendas and anxieties.

**The Initial Firestorm**

From 1887 to 1888, prior to the publication of *The Judgment of Shomer*, a pitched debate about the merits of Yiddish sentimental fiction played out over seventeen issues of St. Petersburg's *Yidishes folksblat*. A Yiddish weekly founded in 1881, the *Folksblat* aspired to be a highbrow forum for new Yiddish writing and discussion of literary and cultural matters. The controversy enabled the paper to secure its credentials among intellectuals, one of its core constituencies, by attacking a symbol of lowbrow culture, all while feeding the sale of papers with juicy accusations of literary impropriety and transgression. While the paper's contributors honed in on Shomer as a scapegoat for all that was aesthetically and morally corrupt in popular Yiddish fiction, they were not the first to question his artistic legitimacy. As

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early as 1880, Shomer poked good-natured fun at his critics in his chapbooks, suggesting that he already had his detractors several years before the controversy exploded later that decade. For instance, he prefaced his Yiddish novel *Der baal ishure, oder der falscher khosen* (1880) with a Hebrew poem in which he attacked his critics as “foolish” and “stupid.” In 1886 he introduced the second half of his novel *Der raykher betler* with a fable in which he portrayed his critics as failed novelists who howl like dogs trying to get attention. Such responses were typical of the way in which Shomer dealt with his critics. He regularly called them names or accused them of jealousy or greed in an attempt to discredit them. He never engaged the substance of their critique.

Shomer began to take negative appraisals of his writing more seriously when David Frishman, in the Hebrew paper *Hayom*, and Shimon Dubnov, writing under the pseudonym Criticus in the Russian-Jewish periodical *Voskhod*, published harsh critiques of his work. Dubnov’s article, a review of Shomer’s Yiddish chapbook *Der raykher betler* (1886) and his Hebrew novel *Ha-nidahat* (1886) anticipated several charges that Sholem Aleichem would later build upon in *The Judgment*, including the accusations that Shomer’s novels lacked authenticity, corrupted the Yiddish language through an over-reliance on Germanisms, and trivialized the contemporary drama of Jewish life by offering up cheap escapist fairy-tales. He prodded Shomer: “Is Jewish life so impoverished that there is not enough material in it for true creativity?”

Several months after the publication of Dubnov’s *Voskhod* review, the controversy spilled over to the *Yidishe folksblat*. The fact that it took a Russian-language Jewish periodical to prompt a Yiddish newspaper to investigate the state of Yiddish popular fiction says a great deal about the self-respect of Yiddish writing in this period. From the outset, the *Yidishe folksblat* staged and managed the controversy (anticipating the court scene in *The Judgment*) by providing space to voices that were both for and against Shomer, including anonymous editorials by his detractors and rebut-

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4. Shmuel Niger, “Shomer’s mishpeṭ—af Sholem Alekhemen.” *Di isukunṭ* (February 1977), 111-112. It is possible that Shomer invented (or anticipated) some of his own critics in order to secure his reputation with the masses as someone who provided them with the type of literature that elites, presumably, would not want them to have access to. That is, Shomer’s reputation benefited from criticism—real or imagined—that enabled him to play the embattled defender of the ordinary Yiddish reader.


tales by Shomer himself. For instance, issues 1 and 3 of the paper in 1887 featured a sympathetic feuilleton by Sh. Berdichevski in which Shomer was called a “rare” writer whose œuvre includes many realistic descriptions of Jewish life and whose critics attack him out of jealousy for his success. The paper’s editor, Alexander Tsederboym, wedged Y.M. Vollson’s sharp critique of Shomer’s novel Der shillinazidiker hoz (1886) between installments of Berdichevski’s piece, giving the appearance of a burgeoning controversy. Tsederboym also felt free to take sides: “What is the purpose of [your] manufactured love stories and fantasies, copied from the French novels of the 1840s...? We are living in different times; people today do not need fantasies. Real life provides enough material on its own...” Yiddish intellectuals were rallying around realism as what was most needed to establish artistic legitimacy for Yiddish fiction.

The Folksblat gave the appearance of fairness by providing multiple perspectives, but in reality the tone of the discussion was overwhelmingly critical of Shomer, who initially defended himself in the form of a letter to the editor. He personalized his response to Vollson’s comments by calling him “childish,” and attempted to embarrass the editor of the paper for daring to publish critiques without having read Shomer’s works himself. He reminded Tsederboym that when he had translated one of his early stories into Hebrew and sent it to Y.L. Gordon, then the editor of one of Tsederboym’s other newspapers, Ha-melits, Gordon published it and invited Shomer to send him additional materials. Given Gordon’s standing as the most accomplished Hebrew poet and Jewish Enlightenment figure of his generation, Shomer suggested that Gordon’s opinion must stand for something: “If my stories are so bad, why did you publish [them] in your own newspaper Ha-melits?" Tsederboym retreated somewhat, conceding that he had not read Shomer’s writing closely enough to be able to offer a personal assessment of them, and acknowledged that “I know for sure that writers such as you, Mr. Shomer, are in good standing with the people and are useful to them.”

11. Shomer, Veiti or: a literarishe kampyf (New York, 1898). 2. Though Shomer took Tsederboym’s comments as an admission that he had been wrongly smeared, he failed to recognize the slight inherent in Tsederboym’s apology, in which the latter readily admitted that he had not bothered to read Shomer’s novels.
It was Shomer's misfortune that the *Yidishes folksblat* was sold during the controversy to another publisher, Yisroel Levi, whose own attitudes toward Yiddish were highly vexed (he often used the paper to attack Yiddish, to the frustration of other intellectuals who were hoping to use its pages to bring the language greater esteem amid accusations that it was little more than jargon). As a journalist, Levi recognized that controversy was the bread and butter of selling newspapers. He quickly fueled the controversy's fire by penning his own attack on Shomer under the pseudonym *Deryudisher gazlen* (The Jewish Thief), in which he accused Shomer's novels of corrupting young readers with their implausible plots. He translated segments from Dubnov's earlier Russian critique of Shomer that had appeared in *Voskhod* and republished them in Yiddish. Since Shomer was under the impression that he had put such criticism to rest only months earlier, the renewed attacks enraged him. In his feuilleton "A Blow for a Blow," he responded to Dubnov by suggesting that "he must have written these words out of jealousy, hatred, or perhaps simply because he is a little out of his mind (it shouldn't happen to us)." He neither concealed his condescension toward his critics ("I am not interested in the criticism of fresh-baked little writers. They cannot destroy me in any way") nor did he hold back his patronizing attitude toward his readership ("One must provide a child with something sweet, even when one wants to give him bitter medicine. I know that if I had just provided my readers with moralistic writings they would not have picked up a single book. As the saying goes, 'Od na'aryisrael—the Jewish people is still naive"). Shomer also penned a letter to Levi demanding to know why his paper seemed to have it in for him, and threatened that if the latter did not respond, "I promise you that I too have a pen that can pour out my wrath." Levi responded to him within days with the admission that personally he had never read Shomer's works because they were difficult to obtain in St. Petersburg. This was not only untrue, but also a backhanded apology because it suggested that Shomer's novels were well beneath the standards of writers and other intellectual readers in that city. Shomer assumed that Levi's response put an end to the matter, and was shocked when, a short time later, critical reviews of his latest novels by Volfson, Yehoshua Ravnitski, and Sholem Aleichem surfaced anew in the *Folksblat*. He was incensed that the new editor provided space to an upstart writer with the "sweet name" Sholem Aleichem, who was trying to make a repu-

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15. *Yeikt or*, 4.
tation for himself at Shomer's expense, and especially by the paper's unfairness in publishing anonymous reviews. In the foreword to his historical novel *Der letster yudisher kenig* (which appeared in 1888, prior to *The Judgment*) he crafted a pun on Sholem Aleichem's pen name, suggesting that although the name was convivial, his stories left much to be desired: "Vet nit zayn keyn Sholem Aleichem, vet zayn Aleichem Sholem ob er men zol khotsh kenen a halbe shtunde un nit geneisn." ("If there is no Mr. How-Do-You-Do then there will be Mr. Fine-Thank-You-and-You, but may we at least be able to read for a half hour without yawning!") In the same novel, he chastised the entire editorial board of the *Folksblat* for providing space for Sholem Aleichem's "clownish pranks" and "prattling," and provided a fable called "The Mites and the Lion," in which he cast himself in the role of the heroic king of the jungle while the contributors to the *Folksblat* were his annoying pests.

The debate about the merits of Shomer's writing that occupied pages of *Folksblat* in 1887-88 provides us with the necessary context for understanding both the tone and central contentions of *The Judgment of Shomer*. Sholem Aleichem's literary trial of Shomer did not appear *ex nihilo*, but was the result of several years of attacks, counter-attacks, and mutual invective. Nonetheless, Sholem Aleichem's achievement in *The Judgment of Shomer* was one of both synthesis and style. It brought together criticisms about Shomer that had been first introduced by others, and packaged them in such an entertaining way that readers forgot they were reading literary criticism. *The Judgment*’s fiction of a mock-trial provided a patina of neutrality, which only added to the bite of its partiality. In the late 1880s, literary criticism could not afford to be objective, especially when it saw itself at the center of a campaign to create a Yiddish literary high art.

By casting himself in *The Judgment* as court stenographer, Sholem Aleichem borrowed from a long tradition of “found texts” in European literature. It was a gesture that enabled him to masquerade as someone who

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16. For a sense of the exchange, see Pri et s baver (Y.M. Volfsen), "Kritik af kritik," *Yidishes folksblat* 32 (1887), 511-512, Sholem Aleichem, “Fun vayne medines,” *Yidishes folksblat* 33 (1887), 517-552, Rav-katsin (Y.Kh. Ravitiski), "An eysek mit shnutes," *Yidishes folksblat*, supplement to issue 4 (1888), 15-15, Y.Kh., 42-33, Anonymous, "Reisenz," *Yidishes folksblat*, supplement to issues 11-12 (1888), 355-361, Eyner fun d mitarbeit, "Reisenz: Di goldene kelber," *Yidishes folksblat* 16 (1888), 155-157. It is likely that Levi himself was one of the anonymous reviewers. By writing under several different covers, he was able to orchestrate the debate to ensure maximum controversy.


18. Sholem Aleichem was also responding to a fascination with public trials, which became a novelty after the Russian judicial reforms of 1874. Several contemporary Russian writers, including Dostoyevski and Tolstoy, included trials in their work.
was simply providing his readers with a service by transcribing the proceedings. In reality, the document was part of a deliberate agenda to establish new aesthetic hierarchies that corresponded to his own preference for the intimacy of vernacular experience. Though *The Judgment* was intended for a rarefied audience of fellow writers and was never widely disseminated, it later would prove to be an important turning point in the way Yiddish literary history understood its own maturation.

**Sholem Aleichem's Anxiety of Influence**

*The Judgment of Shomer* was one of several important texts in Sholem Aleichem's ideological coming of age as a writer. Indeed, it would be difficult to understand what he was attempting to accomplish without reading it along with several other essays and literary works of the same period; as a group, these texts enable us to understand not only what kind of fiction he was attempting to uproot by attacking Shomer, but also the kind of fiction he proposed to replace it. These efforts constituted the first steps in what would be recognized later by literary historians as a project of Yiddish canonical self-definition.

*The Judgment of Shomer* was a public exorcism of Sholem Aleichem's own demons as a writer. It liberated him from his own sentimental desires by deliberately choosing a foil in Shomer against which to redefine his own writing. Sholem Aleichem clearly had Shomer's brand of fiction in mind in the following meta-fictional moment that appeared in one of his earliest novels, *Natasha* (published as an insert in the *Yidishes folksblat* in 1881):

Our Yiddish readers have come to expect that the hero of a novel must either be an angel or a devil; he must be so good, so honest, so pure, like an angel in heaven...who only does good. And since the world is sinful this poor angel finds himself pursued to the ends of the earth. For his love he is repaid with hatred; for his honesty—with murder. And this is how this poor innocent character is blackened. Until the novel concludes. Then he suddenly is repaid a hundred times over for his good deeds, and the murderer, the evil protagonist, gets his comeuppance from the author...The reader praises the bright author for his pretty fairytale; for throwing together such fantastic stories that enrage and terrify us....But let us not talk badly about our manufacturer [of fiction], our Paul de Kock.\(^{20}\)

This passage anticipates the kind of arguments Sholem Aleichem refined a few years later in *The Judgment of Shomer*, establishing that, from his ten-
tative first steps as a Yiddish writer in the early 1880s, he was already working out ways to discipline himself.

In the period between the publication of Natasha and The Judgment of Shomer, the demands of the market outpaced even Shomer’s productivity, giving rise to a school of hack imitators. What started in Sholem Aleichem’s early imaginative universe of Natasha as a sarcastic jab at a much more successful and established competitor gradually morphed into an obsessive campaign over legitimate and illegitimate forms of Yiddish popular fiction.21 As he wrote to his friend and fellow writer Y.I. Ravnitski during the composition of The Judgment of Shomer: “With God’s help, Sholem Aleichem will soon do away with Shomer, that beloved transformer of paper into rags, cut him up, atomize him, destroy all traces of his bones, innards, and arteries, so that the public knows once and for all who and what he really is.”22 Sholem Aleichem’s rhetoric here speaks of evicacement, pointing to an emotional over-entanglement with the fate of a fellow writer. The battle was for nothing less than the future character of Yiddish fiction.

The Judgment of Shomer appeared at the same moment that Sholem Aleichem worked through a new definition for himself of the so-called “Jewish novel” and launched a new literary anthology, Di yidishe folks-bibliotek (The Jewish People’s Library, 1888–1889). Together, these works provide a full portrait of Sholem Aleichem’s artistic thinking at this transitional moment, when he emerged from his first tentative steps as a Yiddish writer into a decisive aesthetic force and guiding critical voice.

The Judgment of Shomer is organized around concerns over the appropriateness of Shomer’s plots, characterizations, and language. Sholem Aleichem’s overriding apprehension was that Shomer’s writing represented the derivativeness of Yiddish popular fiction. He accused its plots of being hackneyed adaptations of European dime novels. He determined that the antirealist base of Yiddish popular fiction had a corrosive effect on the masses because it prevented them from seeing their own lives reflected in literature and distracted them from the social changes that were going on all around

21. For instance, in a list he compiled under the pseudonym Solomon Eskidker, he showed that of the seventy-eight Yiddish books published between 1887 and 1888, almost 105 were penned by Shomer and his imitators, whereas only one was penned by S.Y. Abramovitch, whom he considered his mentor. A similar list published a year later included a total of thirty-five books by Shomer, compared to two by S.Y. Abramovitch. Sholem Aleichem’s list-making was not only an attempt to take stock of what was being published, but was intended to force his fellow intellectuals to acknowledge that they were being out-read, in part, because they were being severely out-published. See Solomon Eskidker, “A rozstebler alekh zherazer she okher vos zemer opgedruckt gevorn inem yen TRM Kh [1887/1888],” Di yidishe folks-bibliotek 1 (1888), 169–173; see also the list published for 1888/1889 in Di yidishe folks-bibliotek 2 (1889), 154–159.

them. As he saw it, Jewish fiction ought to reflect the rhythms—religious, economic, political, linguistic—of lived Jewish experience. Sholem Aleichem was neither a cultural nationalist nor even a populist at this stage; rather, he believed that language was constitutive and that because Yiddish was the language spoken by Eastern European Jewry, its literature ought to reflect that distinct experience. At the same time, where Sholem Aleichem differed from many of his fellow intellectuals was in his desire to break free in his own writings from the small, elite audiences who were the consumers of maskilic Yiddish fiction up until that point. Sholem Aleichem’s search for a new definition of folks-literatur, or literature of the people, sought to bridge the divide between elite and lowbrow audiences by establishing a category of popular literature that was both aesthetically refined, representative of lived reality, and accessible.

Though Sholem Aleichem never invoked the word shund (trash) in The Judgment of Shomer (he refers to Shomer’s writing in the document as mitz, or garbage) no writer in the history of Yiddish literature was more responsible for establishing shund as a literary category that put the appetites of the mass market in competition with the talents of emerging artists. Prior to the emergence of Sholem Aleichem, the audience for secular Yiddish literature was divided. On the one hand, there was a mass audience (which included many women) that was spread out over the market towns

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23 A close reading of Shomer’s fiction reveals that Sholem Aleichem’s evidence in The Judgment is highly selective. He bases his discussion on two dozen works by Shomer, most written in the years and months immediately preceding the composition of The Judgment. Recent scholarship argues that Shomer’s novels, even those cited by Sholem Aleichem, contain the valuable portraits of contemporary Jewish life that Sholem Aleichem insists are missing. In these studies Shomer emerges as a populist maskil who takes on religious extremism and the Jewish aristocracy, attacks anachronistic customs, and dives into Jewish history for inspiration. For a balanced discussion of the fairness and shortcomings of Sholem Aleichem’s criticisms in The Judgment of Shomer, see Sophie Grace Pollack, “Shomer Ivor, Shomers mishpeth leSholem Aleichem,” Ha’Ivrit 5 (1999), 109–159.

21 Chone Shimeruk concludes that because Sholem Aleichem did not use the term shund in The Judgment of Shomer, the term must not have become the accepted way of defining lowbrow fiction in Yiddish until a short time after 1888. Shimeruk underscores the difficulty of coming to a precise definition of shund in part because trash fiction meant different things in different national literatures. For instance, while Lessing used the term broadly to refer to writing that was worthless in his opinion, others associated it more narrowly with the presence of titillating or erotic elements. For Sholem Aleichem, shund included literature that lacked both aesthetic and moral depth. Sholem Aleichem consistently refers to Shomer as a romanmakher (a producer or maker of novels), a label that focuses solely on the economic function of his trade and denies it any aesthetic value. He believed that the speed with which Shomer published his books was an indication that Shomer did not consider writing a form of art but rather an industry. See Shimeruk, 525–554.
and cities of Eastern Europe. This was the market for lowbrow works of escapist fantasy. These readers turned to Yiddish literature for its entertainment value. On the other hand, a more educated (mainly male) audience of aspiring intellectuals, based mainly in the Russian Empire’s urban centers, consumed novels and dramas that were innovative in their narrative style, disseminated Enlightenment values, and held a mirror up to Jewish society. Sholem Aleichem’s desire was to co-opt the first audience, and especially the female readers, for himself. He recognized that most Jewish intellectuals would always first turn to Hebrew or to European literature due to their cultural prestige, and saw Yiddish instead as means through which to create a broad-based folks-litteratur that could bridge the gap between the intellectuals and a potential mass readership by attracting both groups to the same vernacular texts. Indeed, this is played out by the opening scene of *The Judgment of Shomer*, which features a courtroom filled with Shomer’s fans, “simple Jews...married women, girls, half-educated young ladies, schoolboys.” Sholem Aleichem peoples the courtroom audience with representatives of what he hopes to claim as his eventual audience, even though the

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25 Alyssa Quint recently pointed to the memoirs of Ephraim Deinard (1831–1930) and Menashe Halpern (1871–1960) to argue that there were two distinct beginnings to modern Yiddish literature. The first, which we might call the standard or “maskilic” version, took place during the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century. It reached for the “highbrow” and “elite,” and included figures such as Aksenfeld, Linetski, and Abramovitch. However, Quint argues that there is also a sub-canonical origin that began only in the late 1870s. It was “audience-driven.” “lowbrow,” “popular,” and much more connected to the Yiddish book trade than elite Yiddish fiction, which found its outlet first in manuscripts circulated among intellectuals and then in intellectual journals. In Deinard’s *Memories of My People* (1920), the Odessa-based Hebrew bookstore owner recalls with some bitterness that there was no local market for Yiddish literature until the emergence of Shomer and the playwright Goldfarb. “[Shomer]...discovered a bookshop in Odessa owned by a couple of shoemakers who bought everything his pen vomited because they did not read Yiddish and could not understand the garbage that Shomer wrote. It was enough for them that the title would be sold, paid in full... There was not one maiden, one wagon driver from Odessa to Berdichev, from Warsaw to Vilna, who did not have Shomer’s name on his/her lips.” (Quint, 62) In recalling the reading habits of his town in his memoir *Parumet* (1952), Halpern adds: “Putting aside the charges fairly or unfairly leveled against Shomer, he has retained the distinction of having taught the masses how to read and for having made from them a large reading circle... The common man was attracted to Shomer’s novels like a magnet.” (Quint, 74–75) If Quint is correct in asserting that both Deinard’s and Halpern’s comments prove that the masses did not consume (or even know about) most of the maskilic Yiddish texts or writers who have been prominent in our understanding of the origins of modern Yiddish fiction, then what she is calling for is the creation of a parallel narrative of origins (or the delineation of a popular canon) in which Shomer would occupy a privileged position. See Alyssa Quint, “Yiddish Literature for the Masses? A Reconsideration of Who Read What in Jewish Eastern Europe,” *YIVO Review* 26:1 (2005), 61–89.
actual readership of *The Judgment of Shomer* was limited to his fellow intellectuals.

Sholem Aleichem's paternalistic contempt for the existing tastes of the literary marketplace prompted his need to distinguish between what we would today call canonical and non-canonical writing. This necessitated the demonization of the Yiddish *shundroman*. In so doing, he argued that there were aesthetic and moral differences between writers who were market-driven and catered to the uncultivated desires of the masses and those who regarded themselves as artists. This might explain why *The Judgment of Shomer* expresses a particular disdain for escapist plots that had no anchor in Jewish life, or for registers of language—especially the use of *dayshnerish* (an inflated use of Germanisms in literary Yiddish)—that seemed overly contrived or pretentious. They signaled a slavishness and aesthetic laziness that, in Sholem Aleichem's view, reflected a depressing acceptance of Yiddish's status as a secondary culture.

*The Judgment of Shomer* was also an opportunity for Sholem Aleichem to describe the creative process of storytelling in a way that enabled him to crystallize his own thinking as a stylist. In pausing to take account of the way Shomer constructs dialogue and characters, or by comparing the similarity of his plot lines to those of French sentimental romances, he taught himself the craft of writing. Though he easily could have made his point about Shomer in a much shorter essay, he seems to have enjoyed quoting from Shomer's works as a way to hone his critical skills, develop his own ideas about the way a work of literature communicates, and express his anxiety about Yiddish as a language of plagiarists that has not yet realized its own self-worth. These satiric riffs enable him to work out his frustration over his failure to achieve popular success at the same time that they psychologically expose Sholem Aleichem in unexpected ways. For instance, he plays up a bourgeois sense of propriety in his comments on vulgarity and sexuality in Shomer's works as a way to distinguish himself as more refined than his competitor. Sholem Aleichem's frequent use of ellipses and allusive language when speaking about the consummation of love in Shomer's romances exhibits prudishness as a means of undermining the false propriety in Shomer's happy endings.²⁷

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²⁶ *Dayshnerish*. A conscious imitation of German within Yiddish, is an indeterminate category that came to take on negative connotations only with the rise of Yiddishism in the late nineteenth century. Yiddishism was hyper-conscious about effacing the language's links to its German determinant. See Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, trans. Shlomo Noble (University of Chicago, 1980), 418 and Shordkhe Schaechter, "The 'Hidden Standard': A Study of Competing Influences in Standardization," *The Field of Yiddish 3* (Mouton & Co., 1969), 281.

²⁷ At times, Sholem Aleichem's own readings in *The Judgment* strain credibility. For instance, in *The Judgment of Shomer* he contrasts an unflattering episode in Shomer's
Sholem Aleichem worked through an emerging definition of the Jewish novel at the same time that he was composing *The Judgment of Shomer*, offering his own contemporaneous novels as counter-texts to Shomer’s fiction. For instance, *Sender Blank*, serialized in 1888 in the *Yidishe folkshbat*, is suddenly interrupted by a meta-fictional commentary:

I am overjoyed that I have the opportunity to begin this chapter like a genuine novelist, and to present my dear reader with heart-rending scenes and moving portraits, just like my literary friends who have long been famous and with whom I can in no way compare myself because their small finger is larger than my loins. Even if I lived a hundred years I would not be able to compose as many pretty romances about which our literature has nothing to be ashamed... And I hope that with God’s help there will come a time in which these nice romances are gathered in wagons and are hauled far, far away, because those who trade in will earn a pretty penny from turning them into pulp... I think about the sad situation of these writers (if they even survive), with their suffering faces as they watch their most interesting works picked up in sacks... and tossed into the wagon! Away, all you blond heroes, frightening criminals, Jewish counts and barons, wild millionaires, clumsy usurers... who were created by those who call themselves writers...

But since much time may pass between now and then, until the moment our public looks up and notices that they have been reared on rags and given straw to chew just like animals, in the interim these enablers will return to their old habits and take up their scribbling. But until that fortunate time arrives let us also attempt, if only for a minute, to borrow this style and provide the reader with the bonus of a surprise romantic scene in this novel.

And so: It was a rare summer night...

Sholem Aleichem here performs a self-referential intervention that draws attention to the reader’s expectations and desires, all the while undermin-

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novel *Polti Ol*, in which the father of a Jewish girl who has gotten pregnant out of wedlock greedily accepts hush money to keep quiet about her condition, against Turgenev’s story *The Jew* (1866), in which a Jewish spy uses his beautiful daughter as bait to gain favor with an army official, all the while standing outside his tent to make sure her modesty is not violated. Sholem Aleichem argues that Turgenev’s story is a more sympathetic representation of Jewish values because it emphasizes the primacy of family and the willingness of even the most corrupt Jewish father to protect his daughter. Sholem Aleichem’s interpretation willfully ignores the fact that Turgenev’s story portrays the Jew in Russian literature as a greedy betrayer of the mother country, describes Yiddish (the language in which his sketches of the army camp are annotated) as a secret, subversive language, and that in the end the Jew does offer up his daughter to the Russian colonel if it will save him from execution.

*Sender blank un zayn gezidil: A roman on a roman* (composed in 1887, published in 1888 under the title *Reb Sender Blank un zayn fulgeshtste familie: a roman on a lube* in *M a verk fun Sholem Aleykhem* 21 (Sholem Aleykhem folksfond, 1925), 91-95.
ing the conventions of the Yiddish popular novel. The passage opens ironi-
cally, with self-deprecation bordering on self-emasculating as he compares
the paucity of his own artistic productivity to that of his senior colleagues
(the reference to the “most interesting” works of such writers is a direct
attack on Shomer, who often included those very words on his own works
as a form of self-advertising). The passage imagines a moment when the
marketplace will correct itself by having no more interest in such sentiment-
al novels, but recognizes that in this remains a distant dream. In order to
speed the process of reform, he crafts an extended parody of Shomer in the
saccharine scene that follows the excerpt above. It allows Sholem Aleichem
to demonstrate that he could write like Shomer if he really wanted to, but
that he has elected to set higher standards for himself. The parody also
shows readers the degree to which their own desires and expectations of
Yiddish fiction have been constructed and managed by the sentimental
novel. The entire scene is a masterful example of early Yiddish meta-fiction, in
which prevailing ways of writing are satirized within a competing narrative
to demonstrate their artlessness.

Sholem Aleichem includes a similar moment in Stempenyu (1888), per-
forming his own anxieties about the frustration and disappointment his
readers must be experiencing as they work through the failed love story
between the refined and pious Rokhele and a musician that is at the heart
of his newest “Jewish romance.” Stempenyu is the best example of his attempt
to upset the conventions of the Yiddish sentimental novel by crafting a story
featuring characters who were recognizable Jewish types:

“A tame story!,” the reader may possibly explain, feeling highly dissatisfied
with the fate I have set before him, because of the fact that he has been
brought up on the “highly interesting romances” in which there is hanging,
drowning, poisoning, and shooting on every page. Or in which perhaps a
poor teacher becomes a duke, and a servant girl a princess, and an assistant
farmer a troubadour. But, what can I do? Am I to blame if amongst our people
there are neither dukes nor princesses? If amongst us there are only ordinary
women and musicians, plain young women with no dreams of marvelous
transformations, and working men who live from hand to mouth?²⁹

In both this and the previous citation from Sender Blank, Yiddish literature enters into
the discussion initiated by Flaubert in Madame Bovary (1856), a novel that pitches its
realism against the sentimental novels read by its heroine, Emma. Her views of life and
love are shaped by the types of novels she reads (or misreads) in her convent school.
Emma’s melancholy and her unhappy marriage are blamed on the fact that she inhabits
an imaginative world of fantasy that has no connection to what is possible in her every-
day life. Flaubert’s description of what Emma reads is not so different from Sholem
Aleichem’s descriptions of Shomer’s romances: “They were all love, lovers, sweet-
hearts, persecuted ladies fainting in lonely pavilions, postilions killed at every stage,
horse-ridden to death on every page, somber forests, heartaches, vows, sobs, tears and
In attempting to find a literary voice that could stand up to the popularity of the Yiddish sentimental novel, Sholem Aleichem looked to his relationship with S.Y. Abramovitch. A short time earlier, Sholem Aleichem had recognized Abramovitch as the “grandfather” of modern Yiddish fiction. He saw Abramovitch as a consummate stylist, one whose stories were rooted in the economic and social realities of everyday Eastern European Jewish life. The celebration of Abramovitch’s silver anniversary a few years earlier in the Russian-language Jewish press was the first time that a Yiddish writer had been held up as a model for a “national writer.”

...kisses, little sniffs by moonlight, nightingales in shady groves, ‘gentlemen’ brave as lions, gentle as lambs, virtuous as no one ever was, always well dressed, and weeping like fountains.” (42) The more Emma reads, the more the nuns worry that Emma is “slipping” (43) from them, “with nothing more to learn, and nothing more to feel.” (45) In order to free Emma from her melancholy, “it was decided to stop Emma from reading novels. Would they not have a right to apply to the police if the librarian persisted at the same in his poisonous trade?” (116) Elsewhere in the novel, after her husband complains that “Although my wife has been advised to take exercise she prefers always sitting in her room reading,” (96) Flaubert inserts an interlocutor for Emma (and for the reader) to underscore that although her escapist fiction may contain “noble characters, pure affectionations, and pictures of happiness ... they miss, it seems to me, the true end of art.” (97) Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Eleanor Marx Aveling (Modern Library, 1918). Both Flaubert and Sholem Aleichem are particularly concerned about the situation of female readers, who are assumed to be the consumers of such fiction, though the difference between the bourgeois consumers of sentimental fiction imagined by Flaubert and the housemaids held up by Sholem Aleichem as Shomer’s audience suggests that the sentimental novel served a different class of readers in European society than it did in Jewish society.

Sholem Aleichem’s insistence in the passage above that Yiddish literature could not draw on the same romantic past that fed the European literary imagination finds a parallel in Henry James’s biographical study *Hawthorne* (1879), in which he discusses the emergence of American literature. James elaborated upon a comment Nathaniel Hawthorne included in the preface to *The Marble Faun* (1860) in which he stated that as an American he comes from a country that is bereft of a romantic past. James understood this to mean that as American literature struggled to achieve its independence from English literature, it needed to take into account that it could not draw on the same sources that European literature took for granted—royal families, high society, world-class universities, the Church, architecturally distinguished cities, and so forth.

According to Olga Litvak, the celebratory essays in 1884 emphasized Abramovitch’s literary talents and the roots of his fiction in popular experience. In him, they found a Yiddish writer who could both withstand “criticism” and command “popular interest.” Her discussion of a biographical essay by his friend Lev Timshel shows how Abramovitch had a hand in managing his own myth as a national writer who functions as “a new kind of folk hero... a mask who transcended the material inducements of emancipation in order to suffer alongside his own impoverished people.” See Olga Litvak, *Conscription and the Search for Modern Russian Jewry* (Indiana University Press, 2006), 129-132.
lectuals provided Sholem Aleichem with a reason to ally himself with Abramovitch, and to embrace the people's vernacular as a language worthy of creative expression.

On 28 June, 1888, Abramovitch wrote a letter to his "grandson" in which he famously advised Sholem Aleichem, via a play on the word roman (which in Yiddish means either a novel or a romance), "not to write romances. You have an entirely different style. After all (as you yourself say), you are my grandson. Do you comprehend what this means? Understand it and obey your grandfather and, with God's help, you will become something special. In general, all Yiddish romances are worthless. They make me want to vomit. If there are romances among our people, they are entirely different from those that exist among other peoples. One must understand this and write entirely differently." Sholem Aleichem took this advice to heart, in part because it corresponded to what he had already undertaken with the publication of The Judgment of Shomer several months earlier. As the self-styled inheritor of Abramovitch's commitment to writing as an artistic calling (rather than as a way to make money), Sholem Aleichem took it as his duty to domesticate the meaning of the Yiddish roman, even if it necessitated the writing of "a roman on a roman" (a novel without a romance). His response to Abramovitch's letter appeared as the preface to Stempenyu:

Your words sank deep into my heart; and I began to realize by how much and in what way a Jewish novel must differ from all other novels. The truth is that the circumstances under which a Jew falls in love and declares his passions are altogether different from the circumstances which control the lives of other men. Besides, the Jewish nation has its own peculiarities—its own habits, and manners, and customs... And these too must have their place in the Jewish novel if it is to bear a true resemblance to Jewish life.

He continued a short while later: "Over any work, you wrote to me in another letter, over any piece of work, dear grandchild, one must sweat and toil. One must...chisel every separate episode to perfection..." He then added: "I should like that in a book there should not only be beauty of form, but also truth, and depth, and sympathy, as we find in life itself. There should be something to think about, as well as to amuse." Sholem Aleichem here advances a Flaubertian case for the artfulness of a realism native to Jewish experience, arguing that Jewish experience is not only worthy of realistic representation in literature, but that such a representation, rather than denoting literature to the supposed humbleness of its characters, would, in fact, elevate the status of such literature to that of respectable art.

31. Quoted as Letter #110 in Dos mendele bukh, ed. Nahman Mayzel (Ikuf, 1959), 156.
32. This became the paradoxical subtitle of Stempenyu.
33. Sholem Aleichem, Stempenyu: a shpiker roman (Sholem-Aleykhem folksfond oysgab, 1925), 125.
Collectively, these statements provide a succinct definition of Sholem Aleichem’s aesthetic views about his own writing. They established his belief in the distinctiveness of Jewish life that necessitated the distinctiveness of Yiddish fiction. The recognition that Jews were different from the co-territorial populations among whom they lived made it all the more important that Yiddish literature—as the people’s vernacular—reflect this consciousness in its settings, characterizations, plots, and ethical vision. This was a direct attack on pulp fiction writers like Shomer, who produced works at an astonishing pace and contended that the sole goal of their fiction was to entertain and distract readers from the challenges of their daily lives. Inherent in the creation of a new standard for Yiddish fiction, was the venue in which Stempenyukh appeared: a supplement to Sholem Aleichem’s own new anthology of Yiddish literature Di yudische folks-bibliotek: a bukh far literatur, brittek un visskraft (The Jewish Popular Library: An Anthology of Literature, Criticism, and Scholarship). In undertaking this editorial endeavor (and putting his own money behind it), Sholem Aleichem signaled that the only way to transform the landscape of Yiddish publishing was to find ways to disseminate higher-quality Yiddish fiction. The Folks-bibliotek was conceived as an elegant product that would accord Yiddish literature with prestige. Sholem Aleichem managed to publish only two volumes of the anthology prior to the loss of his fortune in October 1890. Nonetheless, for the first time Yiddish literature had a figure who persuaded both established writers and figures who were reticent to publish in Yiddish to send him their best work so that they could be published together in one volume. The first issue of the Folks-bibliotek included both a revised edition of the first half of Abramovish’s Dos vintshfingert (The Wishing Ring), I.L. Peretz’s debut in Yiddish literature with the narrative poem “Monish,” and pieces by David Frishman and Simon Frug, who had previously published mainly in Hebrew or Russian. Aside from Sholem Aleichem’s own Stempenyukh (itself something of an artistic manifesto), the first volume of the Folks-bibliotek also included a short essay in which he explored the need to standardize Yiddish orthography and grammar so as to facilitate reading and comprehension. This revealed Sholem Aleichem’s eagerness to manage the process of bringing Yiddish out of its chaotic infancy to a more mature understanding of itself as a literature that needed to take itself seriously. He understood that the process of shifting reading habits among the public would be incremental, as evidenced by the fact that the initial runs of his

35 The second volume of the Folks-bibliotek further expanded the coterie of writers who were prepared to sign on to Sholem Aleichem’s program, most of whom came to occupy a dignified place in Yiddish literary history as the process of its canonization later unfolded. The second volume included Sholem Aleichem’s newest novel Yosele Saltsman, which, like Stempenyukh before it, was crafted as a self-consciously “Jewish” romance in which the values of self-restraint, modesty, and collective responsibility were pitched against individual self-fulfillment.
Folks-bibliotek still pale in comparison to the lowbrow Yiddish romances that continued to flood the market. Much of Sholem Aleichem’s thinking about this new aesthetic standard crystallized in his essay “A Letter to a Close Friend,” which appeared in the second volume of the Folks-bibliotek. The piece is worth quoting at length, not only because it reveals Sholem Aleichem’s fear that a commitment to a Jewish realism might be a turn-off to readers, but also because of the way it elaborates upon the conversation initiated by The Judgment of Shomer a year earlier.

My critics do not want to forgive me in any way for two things. First, they ask me, as is the custom among Jews: ma nishtau? How is a Jewish novel different than any other novel in the world? One of them, who appears to be quite educated, wrote to me: “Until physiology proves that the Jew was created with a different heart, blood-type, or nerves, I will not understand how there can be such a thing as a Jewish or a non-Jewish novel.”

Everyone admits that Jewish life implies a different type of existence. So why can’t they understand that the novel, in which life is portrayed, should not have a different complexion? Why should they not want to understand that every novel must have its own expression and physiognomy so that it reveals an accurate reflection of the life of the people that is described in it...

Having established his understanding that every national literature must be as distinct as the nation from which it emerges, Sholem Aleichem anticipates that his portrayal of Jewish love may at first bore those who are used to the flights of fantasy and dramatic confrontation between “good” and “evil” typical of Yiddish popular fiction:

It is worth mentioning that a Jewish young woman is not the same as any other young woman. Raised and reared among Jews...a Jewish girl knows that she must first love God, then her parents, then her husband and children...A Jewish heroine...contains her desires, forgets her caprices, abandons her passions for someone else....This is the nature of Jewish heroism.

Where Shomer was determined to play up romantic suffering, jealousy, intrigue, and betrayal among casts of characters who found themselves in

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36. Alysa Quinn observes that in 1888, 5,200 issues of Di yidishn folks-bibliotek were published, compared to 96,000 copies of Shomer’s works. These figures suggest that the market in this period for serious Yiddish fiction was still immature and limited to elite readers. See Quinn, 81.

37. “A breytn a gemt fraynt,” Di yidishn folks-bibliotek 2 (Kiev, 1889), 304-310. This work should be read in conjunction with his short pamphlet Der yidisher dates in di besem verk fun unzere folks-shriftnsteler (Jewish Poverty in the Best Works of Our National Writers) (St. Petersburg, 1888) in which he holds up Abramovitch’s Fiddler the Last as a model of the type of Yiddish realism that addresses the socio-economic conditions of Jewish life and resists the escapism and fantasies offered up by sentimental fiction.

situations completely foreign to Eastern European Jewish life, Sholem Aleichem contended that Shomer’s idealization of love at all costs was artistically false and socially offensive to the values by which Jews love and live. This enables him to explain and defend his artistic decision in Stempenyu to short-circuit the romance between the modest Rokhele and the unrefined eponymous musician. Her decision to resist his amorous advances after reading his garbled attempt at a love letter privileges Jewish literacy over sentimentality. This embedded mockery of Shomer’s style dashes the expectations of readers, and seems to offer a new heroism of self-restraint in its place. Sophisticated readers would have caught on to the irony of Sholem Aleichem’s prescriptions, given the author’s own biography as someone who initiated a secret affair with a young woman whose father had hired him to serve as her tutor. His “advice” to Jewish girls in the novel that it is more heroic to control their desires and behaviors out of respect for traditional standards of modesty was actually intended to portray the deleterious effects of the suppression of desire as it actually existed in Jewish society. At first reading, he comes across as a cultural conservative, protective of young female readers who might otherwise be inclined to run off with inappropriate lovers because of the influence of Shomer’s novels. Upon reflection, however, the radical undertow of his writing emerges.

Sholem Aleichem’s choice of two musicians as his male protagonists in Stempenyu and Yosele Sotelwey also performed a kind of cultural service:

A klezmer musician? A cantor? I wanted to show how artists and poets discover themselves in this world...and how low these great talents among us have fallen, how they go unrecognized. Such a talent as Stempenyu would have been acclaimed as a great talent, as a virtuoso among any other people, but among us how is he treated? As nothing more than a folk musician. Talents such as Stempenyu and Yosele Sotelwey are numerous among us but they are shunned...And if one of them manages to pop up to demonstrate his fire, nobody understands him...So their lives are very lonely...⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Sholem Aleichem underscores the degree to which the achievements of the Jews’ native artists come into conflict with dominant social conventions that minimize or denigrate their importance. Both klezmer musicians and traditional cantors, models of native creativity, occupied a relatively low position in a society that privileged the refinement of intellectual achievement and wealth as signs of social status. However, Sholem Aleichem self-identifies with them as marginal figures whose artistic independence necessarily comes into conflict with societal mores. He was attempting to

⁷⁰ Ibid., 405.
⁷¹ Ibid., 406–407.
⁷² For more on this, see Anita Norich, “Portraits of the Artist in Three Novels by Sholem Aleichem,” Prooftexts 13 (1983), 237–251.
enhance the status of the Jewish artist among a readership for whom such talents had never before had any importance. "The people must know what powers it has, what rarities wander among it," he explained elsewhere, furthering his contention that a central function of the Jewish writer was to provide audiences with an awareness of their own talents and self-worth. As the people's vernacular, Yiddish—much more so than Hebrew or Russian—was ideally suited to represent the cadences of Jewish life among the masses, and in the process to enable readers to better understand themselves. Sholem Aleichem recognized that elevating the tastes of readers so that they would come to desire quality Jewish fiction would be a long process that needed to be carefully nurtured. If he was going to be successful in convincing readers that their lives were the legitimate stuff of a literature worth reading, he first needed to justify for himself, via The Judgment of Shomer, why the Yiddish popular romance was no longer legitimate, despite its seductions.

"Let There Be Light": Shomer Responds

The publication of The Judgment of Shomer was only the beginning of a polemical battle that would rage, on and off, for decades. Shomer was so infuriated by the belief that he was being scapegoated by Russian Jewish intellectuals (and so attracted to the new possibilities of a mass market of Yiddish immigrants in New York) that he moved across the Atlantic the year following its publication, in 1889. Despite the new distance between them, Shomer rallied to his own defense almost as soon as he could digest Sholem Aleichem's verdict. In the preface to his novel Der mord oys libe (1890) Shomer raised the populist flag in an attempt to portray Sholem Aleichem and his supporters as being out of touch with the reading masses: "You empty critics can say what you want, scream in the streets that my novels are foolish, pass verdicts against me as much as your hearts desire. I will do what I do, I will continue to write fairy tales for my readers which, thank God, are helpful to thousands of people and will continue to be more useful than the prattling of your foolish critics." Shomer himself fanned the flames of controversy by continually referring to The Judgment in an obsessive effort to discredit it. For instance, in the story "Yudke shnirkes derisye-lung" we find the first suggestion (repeated later in his 1898 pamphlet Yehi or) that Sholem Aleichem was a charlatan who used his new found wealth to purchase the talent of others and publish their work under his own name. In 1890, Shomer published an extensive overview of the development of Yiddish literature in the nineteenth century in the pages of Der menshmsfraynd (issues 28–48), the paper he founded soon after his arrival.

42. "Ab rivv," 408.
in New York, in which he had generous words for almost every major Yiddish writer of the nineteenth century—with the significant exception of Sholem Aleichem, in whom he did not find a trace of literary talent. The review essay seems to have been designed, through supposedly disinterested analysis, to write Sholem Aleichem out of the emerging literary canon in much the same way that he felt Sholem Aleichem had attempted to exclude him.14 His criteria for being a good writer included “talent to tell a story...so that the reader will want to read it.” This was intended as a not-so-subtle attack on Sholem Aleichem’s early novels.15 Similarly, Shomer’s foreword to Ester (1891) lashes out sarcastically: “I am sure that this small tale will greatly interest our reading public. They certainly will enjoy it more than the hefty Kindershtiln and Sender Blankin, and perhaps even more than the fat Folks-bibliotek, which are so overweight with wisdom that no mortal could possibly have the privilege of appreciating them...”16 His bitterness was also evident in his preface to Di amerikanishe glikn: a roman fun yidishn lebn in amerike (1895):

So how are you, our Yiddish writers in Russia? I thought that by leaving Russia I would have left you the field wide open to show off your talents. I assumed that as soon as they were rid of me they would show off what they were all about, but until now they have been mute, and from across the ocean I now hear the complaints of the Russian booksellers: “Woe! Send us new novels, [Shomer]. Our customers are tearing us apart, complaining that they have nothing to read, but we have nothing to give them. So what are you up to, you Yiddish critics, you Sholem Aleichems...who with one hand compose verdicts and with the other something else...?”17


45 In summarizing the articles from Do rotshefrayn, Kalmen Marmor shows that Shomer had no patience for Sholem Aleichem’s efforts to reinvent the “Jewish romance.” Were Sholem Aleichem truly a talent, for instance, Shomer explained that Stempfenvy would have ended with more drama. Rokeche’s strong attraction to Stempfenvy should have triumphed over her modesty, prompting her to run away with him and breakdown class distinctions. Or she ought to have suffered so much in realizing that Stempfenvy was not an appropriate match for her that she would have died of heartbreak. Shomer was so comfortable in the genre of the sentimental potboiler that he dismissed the possibility that ordinary readers would find anything else interesting. Marmor shows how Shomer had no understanding of Sholem Aleichem’s desire to create a fiction that reflected the values, experiences, and limitations (as opposed to the fantasies) of Jewish life. See Kalmen Marmor, “Shomer pru arauntserayn Sholem-Aleykhemen romanen.” Morgan fraytshoyt (February 12, 1939), 5, 6.

46 Shomer here is referring to two of Sholem Aleichem’s early novels, and to his anthology of Yiddish literature, The Jewish People’s Library. Quoted by A. Veviorke, “Shomer un Shomerizm,” Di roytre velt (August 1929), 126.

The accusation that his critics were not potent enough to satisfy the desire of Yiddish readers and the innuendo about masturbation may be a transference of his own public emasculation in light of the controversy. However, it is also an insightful reading of Sholem Aleichem, which suggests that much of what he was producing was for his own onanistic pleasures. Sholem Aleichem, despite casting himself as a “writer of the people,” remained his own ideal audience.

Shomer’s 1894 essay, “Le-mi ani amel” (its title references the Hebrew maskilic poem of 1871 by Y.L. Gordon in which he despaired for the future of Hebrew literature) opens with an echo of the male protagonist of the biblical book of Lamentations:

Ant hagerer, I am a living witness to how badly our public deals with the writer who toils on its behalf. Everyone knows that I am special for having written over 200 novels and stories in Hebrew and Yiddish for the people of Israel. Everyone, except for my worst enemies, admits that my novels have had a tremendous impact on readers. And what is the outcome of my efforts? The public looks on with pleasure as coarse young men toss stones at me. And nobody intervened [on my behalf]. Just the opposite—many applauded “Bravo.”

Despite the overblown rhetorical flourish of comparing his fate to that of a witness to the destruction of the Temple, Shomer’s fears were not borne out by reality. He still outsold Sholem Aleichem by tremendous amounts, even though the newer generation of writers such as Sholem Aleichem and Warsaw’s Peretz garnered the respect of intellectuals, pockets of middle-class urban readers and, in the case of Peretz, young radicals. Nonetheless, Shomer continued to stoke the controversy as a way to maintain his relevance in a rapidly expanding literary landscape.

He marked the tenth anniversary of Sholem Aleichem’s verdict with the pamphlet Yehi or: A Literarishe kampf (Let There Be Light: A Literary Controversy), a twenty-eight-page diatribe that swung between desperation and rage. The essay appeared about the same time as a public debate at New York’s Free Jewish People’s Theater (folksbune) in which Shomer’s son, Avrom, defended his father against playwrights Leon Kobrin and Jacob Gordin, who were attempting to stake out New York’s theatrical audiences for themselves by arguing that Yiddish theater could ill afford a shund writer of Shomer’s ilk in its midst. The pamphlet’s title appeals both to a divine

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84. The article appeared in Landkhokhem 10 (July 1894). See Reyzin, Leksikon 784-781.
85. Shomer’s contribution to the American Yiddish theater is beyond the scope of this essay, though he wrote more than three dozen plays. See Andrey Bredstein, “Novshokh-Meyer Shytkivtsch: Another Classic of Yiddish Theater,” Studies in Jewish Civilization 16 (2005), 203-216; Rose Shomer-Batshevel, Undzer fayer Shomer (Buf. 1950), 85-94, 159-161, 167-168. Z. Reyzin’s bibliography at the end of Shomer-Batshevel’s book includes a list of Shomer’s dramas.
source of creative inspiration and to the maskilic call for enlightenment. However, its address to "my critics"—"those swindlers and liars"—and the "dishonest means they employ to tarnish me"—underscores Shomer's real desire to defend himself from stigmatization by discrediting his antagonists and offering his own counter-narrative of the controversy. He attributes Sholem Aleichem's attack against him to jealousy rather than to a commitment to aesthetic principles, and asserts that The Judgment of Shomer was an immature, disproportionate reaction ("an explosive, hellish fire, like a bomb") to a few words that Shomer had included in an earlier novel that suggested that the Folksblat "ought not fill its pages with garbage and with Sholem Aleichem's crazy articles." In revisiting in great detail the history of the literary controversy about him, Shomer occasionally borders on the conspiratorial, climaxing with the accusation that David Frishman ghost-wrote The Judgment of Shomer for payment:

This is a true fact that I can prove through letters from prominent Yiddish writers who with their own eyes saw how Frishman wrote The Judgment of Shomer. Sholem Aleichem himself cannot write. Anything that is good in his work is not his, but rather the result of editorial revisions by Abramovitch and Ravnitski, whom Sholem Aleichem paid handsomely to correct his works. This is what the typesetters of [Sholem Aleichem's novels]. Stemperyn and Yosef Solevey admit.

Though Shomer does not produce copies of such testimonies by "prominent Yiddish writers" and the "typesetters," he imagines a premeditated effort among intellectuals, editors, and writers—financed by Sholem Aleichem's wealth and machinations—to rearrange the literary landscape from above for unsuspecting readers.

At no point in the pamphlet does Shomer recognize that the struggle between him and his critics was part of an effort to define new borders between an emerging Yiddish literature that aspired to artistry and his variety of lowbrow popular fiction, nor does he entertain the possibility that any of the criticisms launched against him have any merit. In his mind, he

50. Yehi or, 1.
51. Ibid., 28.
52. Ibid., 1.
53. Ibid., 4. Shomer repeats the claim again on page 23.
54. He cites letters by editors of Yidishes Folksblat, Alexander Tsederboym and then Yisroel Levi, in which both admit that they did not personally read any of his novels prior to publishing critical essays about him. This allows Shomer to assume that there was an elitist cabal determined to do him in: An editor of a newspaper screams that my novels make our youngsters unhappy and in the end he admits that he personally has never read them." Yehi or, 2.
55. Sholem Aleichem was attempting to refine the image of Yiddish literature by turning the type of shameless self-promotion that had long been a staple of its popular market-
had masses of Yiddish readers on his side as the most potent element in his defense.

Unfortunately, *Let There Be Light* was more therapy for Shomer than an attempt to really engage his critics. It enabled him to release more than a decade of pent-up frustrations, and to lament how competitive, political, and petty the Yiddish literary world had become (*Among us Jews, when one falls upon a writer and makes a pile of rubble of him, all his other colleagues applaud*55), and to take leave of the controversy with a self-righteous "pure conscience."57 Despite protestations to the contrary, Shomer's continued engagement in a debate that Sholem Aleichem had long since moved beyond proved that he never really psychologically recovered from the verdict of *The Judgment of Shomer*.

Rehabilitation and Revision

With the passing of the generation of "classic Yiddish writers" during World War I, Yiddish literature was poised to reassess the function of popular (or sub-canonical) fiction in the creation of a modern Yiddish reader and a self-supporting Yiddish republic of letters. The question was how such a history would be written, by whom, and how it would evaluate Shomer's contributions. What is remarkable about the verdict in *The Judgment of Shomer* is the extent to which it continued being a source of contention decades after it was published. Though Sholem Aleichem never sanctioned its republication in any of the authorized collections of his works (he reputedly found it shrill), Yiddish critics continued to accept it as a founding document, essential to any serious discussion of distinctions between *shnued* and legitimate fiction, and thus a central work of Yiddish canonical self-definition. We might divide up such debates as occurring both within and among three critical camps: the Yiddishist,58 the Soviet, and the modernist.

55. Ibid., 17.
57. Ibid., 28.
58. "Yiddishist" is a rather slippery term, referring both to advocates and producers, as well as to experts in varieties of secular Yiddish culture. Yiddishists also shared, to varying degrees, a commitment to humanism and to the autonomy of Yiddish as a secular Jewish cultural system.
Yiddishist Circles

One of the earliest revisionist interventions on behalf of Shomer’s reputation was offered up in the form of an ode to Shomer by Eliokim Tsunzer (1856–1913), himself among the last of the Yiddish folk bards. For Tsunzer, Shomer represented a more innocent moment when ordinary readers could still turn to Yiddish literature as a source of entertainment and leisure without having to fear the censure of the critics:

\[
\text{Vu iz zayn getlekh r gyeyst nit } \\
\text{gebgryn?} \\
\text{In Bovd, Mitsrayim gyeven, } \\
\text{in Shpanye gekukt mit di gyeystike } \\
\text{oygn,} \\
\text{geshildert undz alts mit zayn pen.}
\]

\[
\text{Where did your sacred spirit not soar? } \\
\text{Your heavenly eyes roamed} \\
\text{From Babylon and Egypt to Spain,} \\
\text{Your pen described everything for us,}
\]

\[
\text{Levi, Ben-Ezra, un Iurfuwas palats} \\
\text{Zahare un kaltn Sibir,} \\
\text{harem fun sultans, hayzer fun dates} \\
\text{fotografirt af papir.}^{59}
\]

\[
\text{Levi, Ben Ezra, and Hecrood’s palace,} \\
\text{Sahara and frigid Siberia,} \\
\text{Sultans’ harems, impoverished homes} \\
\text{All photographed on paper.}
\]

Tsunzer here sharply resists the standard of contemporary realism imposed by Sholem Aleichem in The Judgment of Shomer. Though Shomer’s plots may seem derivative to cléric readers, he suggests that they did do important cultural work by bringing the Eastern European popular Jewish imagination to exotic worlds of the Jewish past, thereby asserting their value as historical fiction.

Shomer’s death also precipitated what we might call a reassessment of the history of Yiddish reading. Zalmen Reyzin, in his Lexicon of Yiddish Literature, Press, and Philology (1929) writes that “after [I.M.] Dik, Shomer was the first to provide the public with material to read, and also the first to write not only story books, but also to create thick works—novels—and through these he had a great influence on the Yiddish masses.”^{60} Reyzin’s bold proclamations and positive words (“it is possible to find in Shomer’s novels realistic characters, talented depictions, psychological insights, in short all the elements that we associate with the content of a true literary work”) marked a significant step forward in the rehabilitation of Shomer within Yiddishist circles. The very fact that his lexicon entry on Shomer amounted to almost fifty pages^{61} signaled a move on the part of some inter-

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60. Z. Reyzin, Leksikon, 768–769.

61. Postwar general histories of Yiddish literature published in English have not been as generous in acknowledging Shomer’s accomplishments, contributing to the replica-
war intellectuals to challenge Sholem Aleichem’s unilateral efforts to exclude Shomer from Yiddish fiction’s canonical borders. Reyzin believed that by downplaying the history of Yiddish reading, the canonical narrative of Yiddish literary history would represent only elite tastes. Others concurred in arguing that Yiddish literature could not have developed without him: “His [Shomer’s] name is the history of the Yiddish reading public and its taste.” Kalmen Marmor added: “He taught the Jewish masses to read Yiddish and thus prepared the base for the new Yiddish literature. He was above all a teacher to the masses.” Y.Y. Sgal went even further, suggesting “that Shomer was the one who gathered the audience which later became Sholem Aleichem’s.”

Such comments are supported time and again in the Yiddish memoiristic literature. In her memoir of her childhood, Rokhl Feynberg asserts: “Above all else I wanted to read Shomer....But it was very hard to get a hold of [his novel] because it was always being read by someone else.” She emphasizes the degree to which she read and reread Shomer, because although she was a voracious reader “apart from Shomer the other [Yiddish writers] interested me very little.”

As Avrom Reyzin’s memoirs confirm, it is an elite misconception that Shomer’s popularity was limited to women or to a less educated class of men:

In the tall library at home, stuffed between several German books...were a few small volumes in Yiddish that my mother bought from an itinerant

64. Kanade ojler (Montreal, November 9, 1940). Quoted by Niger, Di tsukunft (January 1947), 41.
peddler who went house to house, like a beggar, to sell Yiddish chapbooks...These books...were the most beloved in our home. The first book I had the energy to read was by Shomer, Der raykhur belytter...I cannot describe for you how great Shomer's name was in our household, so much so that my mother handed over an entire gulden to purchase this book...As a boy I would hear [Shomer's] novel[s] read out loud by father on Friday evenings to the entire family. My mother would openly weep during the scenes when the evil protagonist and his wife beat the poor orphan. We read Der raykhur belytter over and over. For a time, it was the most beloved book in our home. Even the neighbors borrowed it endlessly. If this book was not the first novel I read by shomer or even the first I read in Yiddish, it was the first to have an impact on me. I knew entire chapters by heart. Its power rested on a simple fable: good would be rewarded and evil punished, not in the next world but in our own lifetime...Of course the book was naive. Even illogical in some ways. But did anyone complain? Life then was so gray and monotonous...Shomer was an event, a holiday...

So to me the name Shomer is still dear. One of the most beloved parts of my youth, its greatest joy, was to read a book. Since reading books is still a pleasure, it is worth reminding ourselves of our first sweet memories of reading, reading the legendary Shomer.66

Reyzin’s perspective is valuable because it emerges out of a personal experience of reading that contextualizes Shomer as a transitional, yet critical literary figure in opening up the pleasures of Yiddish reading to an entire generation, including future Yiddish writers like himself.67

Shomer’s influence on his readers was also conjured in Y.L. Peretz’s short sketch “Di lezerin” (The Female Reader). The setting for the story is the house of an impoverished water-carrier. The only respite for his oldest daughter from her misery occurs on the Sabbath eve, when the rest of the family is asleep. Then she escapes with a popular Yiddish romance: “Her eyes burn. Her sad bosom heaves. Her thin hands tremble...She is reading a romance by Shomer by the candlelight. Her lips tremble with impatience.”68 These memoirists and fiction writers challenge the fixed borders of margin and center by crediting the marginality of so-called sentimental popular literature for creating the audience necessary for a canonical center to later emerge. All of them take note of Shomer’s popular appeal among women, which allows us to conclude that Yiddish reading habits in this period were significantly influenced by gender. Avrom Reyzin credits his

67. According to Pollack, the noted Israeli literary scholar Dav Sadan admitted in a private letter from the 1950s that he read all of Shomer in his youth. “Hashpata.” 7. See also Sadan’s brief introduction to Shirei Shomer vezikronot, ed. Roze Shomer-Rathsels (Jerusalem: Ahiasf, 1952), 7–8.
mother as having been the conduit that brought Yiddish sentimental fiction into the household, and in turn introduced him to the pleasures of Yiddish reading that would eventually influence his decision to become a Yiddish writer.

Zalmen Reyzin’s entry on Shomer in the Lexicon in 1929, along with his comments a year later on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Shomer’s death that “perhaps we are on the verge of a major Shomer rehabilitation in Yiddish literary history,” reflected the willingness of Yiddish literary scholars to reopen the verdict against Shomer and anticipated the re-evaluation that would continue unabated in the ensuing years. Reyzin’s recognition of Shomer’s role in helping to create a Yiddish reader, and his concession that “if it difficult from the standpoint of refined literature to find something positive in his novels, one must admit that his earlier stories are at a high level, and some of them contain vivid portraits of Jewish life in the past,” were proof to some critics that Sholem Aleichem had tarnished the reputation of a Yiddish literary “pioneer” who—unlike other writers, especially those who emerged out of the Hasidic period and earned their reputations by mocking the deficiencies of Jewish life—was at least sympathetic to Jews in his writing.

Critical discussion of Shomer in the interwar period ranged widely, from attempts to discover positive aspects of Shomer’s writing to investigations of Sholem Aleichem’s own motivations and critical shortcomings. Thus, Kalman Marmor is among the earliest critics who rejects Sholem Aleichem’s accusation that Shomer severely harmed the Yiddish language with his Germanisms and instead suggests that “his short stories of Jewish life are filled with folklore. His novels, without overlooking their shortcomings, enriched the Yiddish language with many new words and expressions.” In a different vein, Shaul Ginsburg attacks the prosecution in The Judgment for its ignorance about the way literatures develop and for its lack of attention to differences between benign and corrosive varieties of popular culture.

The Judgment was misguided. [Because] it never made a distinction between shund and entertainment. What is shund? It is that which appeals to one’s lowest instincts, that which calls up immoral feelings. Shund is pornographic. But entertainment is not immoral. It has a noble purpose—to provide spiritual respite, to allow those who are exhausted to re-energize. All healthy world literatures have within them authors who specialize in popular entertainment.

70 Z. Reyzin, Leksikon, 770.
72 Morgn frydayt (December 20, 1924), quoted by Niger, Di isukunft (January 1917), 16.
Not all interwar Yiddishists were prepared to jump onto the rehabilitation bandwagon. As early as 1927, Yisroel Shtern published a feuilleton in Poland’s leading Yiddish literary weekly, *Literarishe bleter*, in which he seemed to mock Shomer and his defenders in a staged conversation between himself and the writer:

“How did it happen that you lost the trial?”

Shomer responded: “In the end people will investigate who was right. Truth will swim up like oil on water.”

I told him: “Mr. Shomer, that time has already arrived. Not a single family can get on without you. They mention you at every table. You have many followers. You have your own school in Yiddish literature called Shomerism... It is the strongest school of all.”

Shomer cannot believe his ears. He thinks he is being lied to or mocked.

“Yes, maestro, you are rehabilitated.”

Shtern here was responding, sarcastically, to the prevalence of pulp fiction in the interwar Yiddish daily press in Poland. This explosion of lowbrow fiction—which was the dict of most contemporary readers—was of serious concern to critics and intellectuals, who traced such works to Shomer’s transgressions.

In an altogether different approach to Sholem Aleichem’s judgment of Shomer’s work, Shmuel Niger’s psychological reading of Sholem Aleichem anticipates Harold Bloom by suggesting that *The Judgment* was a way for him to work through an anxiety of influences that had S.Y. Abramovitch’s *yetser tov* (good impulse) of literary realism and Shomer’s *yetser hara* (evil impulse) of escapist fiction dueling for his artistic soul. According to Niger, Sholem Aleichem set for himself the task of freeing the Yiddish reader from the *kilpu* (husk) of *shund*. It is interesting that Niger employs a mystical term to explain Sholem Aleichem’s motivations; just as the Lurianic kabbalist sets for himself the task of rescuing the sparks of divinity from the husk of materiality, so too does Niger attribute an almost otherworldly impulse—an aesthetic calling—to Sholem Aleichem’s own artistic birth. In Niger’s view, the unforgiving tone and sarcasm of *The Judgment* was a form of overcompensation and penance for literary sins committed at the outset of his own career in such early works such as “Tsvey shteyner,” “Natasha,” and “Kinder shpil,” in which one could find the stain of sentimentality.

Avrom Reyzin, however, was far less generous in finding psychological excuses for what he read as a vicious personal attack that damaged the

75 For more on this, see Shmeruk, 525–554.
career of a fellow writer. With the advantages of hindsight, Reyzin argued that The Judgment of Shomer had been “unnecessary” because “a new era in Yiddish literature was already well underway with the publication of Spektor’s Hoyzfraynd, Sholem Aleichem’s Folks-bibliotek, and later Peretz’s Yudishe bibliotek,” all of which introduced a more sophisticated editorial standard that transformed Yiddish into a competitive, world-class literature. Reyzin’s point is that had Sholem Aleichem just ignored Shomer, his influence would have undergone a more natural decline as the quality of the Yiddish writing that Sholem Aleichem hoped to produce and disseminate garnered attention, especially from an expanding middle-class audience that was prepared to be challenged in its reading. More recently, scholar Chone Shmeruk added that even without Sholem Aleichem’s intervention, the shtund chapbook dried up in Eastern Europe by the end of the 1890s due to the emergence of a mass-circulation Yiddish press. As editors recognized that trash fiction was a lucrative way to provoke readers to buy papers, shtund found a new home in serialization. This left the Yiddish book publishing industry much less vulnerable to market pressures from below and provided room for it to turn its attention to the dissemination of a higher-quality product.

By the time Niger returned to the question of Shomer in a series of three articles in Di isukunft (1947), he exhibited a certain frustration over having to restate his position about the function of sentimental Yiddish fiction in the emergence of the Yiddish reader. His comments were prompted by what he considered the apologetics of articles that had appeared in the American Yiddish press in 1940, on the thirty-fifth anniversary of Shomer’s death. Niger went to great lengths to separate the social function of popular literature (which he recognized as a transitional necessity) and his opinion of Shomer as a writer. On the one hand, as Iris Parush explains, “even Niger expressed a certain recognition of the significance of popular Yiddish literature...the popular novels helped form habits of reading.” On the other hand, Niger went on the offensive by claiming that “the opinion that Shomer was one of the victims and not the victimizer is entirely false: that which Dubnov, Sholem Aleichem, Frishman, Ravnitski, and others wrote about Shomer was temperate compared to the cheap and false accusations that

77. Shomer managed to reestablish himself in New York as a fiction writer and playwright, though never with the same prominence over the market that he had enjoyed in Russia.


79. Shmeruk, 345.


81. Parush, Reading Jewish Women, 154.
Shomer launched against them. \(^{82}\) Niger provided his readers, many of whom had not grown up reading Shomer, with a detailed history of the attacks and counterattacks launched between Shomer and his critics from the early 1880s until his death in 1905, hoping that his would be the last word about this episode in Yiddish literary history. Niger recontextualized Sholem Aleichem’s motivation for questioning the standards of Yiddish popular fiction: “Sholem Aleichem...could not be as objective as we are. He felt and had to feel that the cheap novels were a danger to young Yiddish literature, that the ‘most interesting novels’ would weaken the influence of better Yiddish writers to gradually raise [the tastes of] the Yiddish reading public...\(^{85}\) Niger also resisted the notion, suggested by Shaul Ginzburg as late as 1940, that there had not yet been an honest effort to annul the ‘unfair verdict.’ \(^{84}\) He reminded his readers of the many efforts to rehabilitate Shomer in the interwar period, rehearsing sympathetic comments made by such ideologically diverse writers as the modernist poet Yankev Glatshteyn, the Soviet critic Yevdorke (both of whom we shall discuss below), and the Yiddishists Zalmen Reyzin and Kalman Marmor. He sarcastically concluded that “those who are knocking for a revision are hanging on an open door.” \(^{85}\)

A few years later, in response to the publication of **Undzer foyer Shomer** (Our father Shomer, 1950)—a biography and collection of sympathetic essays edited by Shomer’s daughter Roze Shomer-Batzshelis—Niger conceded yet again that “of course, if [Shomer] had not been so popular, his critics would not have so fiercely opposed him.\(^{86}\) In his articles in *Di tsukunft*, Niger had already conceded that “I am not trying to minimize the role Shomer played in the life of the ordinary Jew, who first had to learn how to read chapbooks... Shomer, to a larger extent than Dik, pulled the greatest numbers of simple Jews to Yiddish reading...\(^{87}\) Nonetheless, Niger was eager to introduce a distinction between the history of Yiddish literature (which he implicitly understood as the history of canonical texts) and the history of Yiddish reading: “Shomer can rightfully inscribe his name in the history of the Yiddish reading public and its taste, but not in the history of the literature itself [my emphasis].” \(^{88}\) Niger was reacting to what he considered to be overblown revisionist claims by Shomer’s daughter, such as “before he [my

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82. *Di tsukunft* 1 (January 1947), 41–42.

83. *Di tsukunft* 2 (February 1947), 115.

84. *Di tsukunft* 1 (January 1947), 43. Niger here is referring to Ginzburg’s article that appeared in *Di tsukunft* (November 1940).

85. *Di tsukunft* 2 (January 1947), 47.


87. *Di tsukunft* 1 (January 1947), 47.

father] started writing, there was no such thing as the Yiddish ‘reading masses.’”89 Niger responded in frustration: “It is not true that there were no readers before him. [Yankel] Dinezon’s second novel Der sitvariser yungermantshil was published in Vilna in 1877 when Shomer had not yet written his first novel. Dinezon’s novel was distributed in ten thousand copies. The Yiddish masses did not need to wait for Shomer to create a reading public....Dik sold no less than one hundred thousand books in 1861 alone.”90

To what extent was Niger’s resistance to lowbrow popular fiction a reflection of a long-standing gendered and classist readings of Yiddish literary history, which privileged works by maskilic writers whose audience was composed of fellow (male) intellectuals and middle-class readers over popular writers who were read more widely by women and the impoverished masses? Parush has argued that the reading habits of Jewish women in the nineteenth century were often disregarded because of a lack of interest in their intellectual development. Women thus had the “benefit of marginality”91 in being free to consume escapist, popular fiction published both in Yiddish and in other European languages. Such reading habits enabled secular influences to filter down to women and gain widespread currency throughout society, thus serving as an important way station on Jewish society’s road to modernity. Since many of Shomer’s novels featured women who were rebelling against traditional society or young couples who were victims of its traditional values, Shomer’s heroes elicited a natural response among women and the working class, who were left behind by society’s religious, intellectual, and economic hierarchies. These “social groups deemed ‘marginal’ in terms of class and gender”92 were the core audience of Yiddish popular fiction that Sholem Aleichem intended to co-opt as his own. By establishing the female reader as instrumental to the development of this mass Yiddish audience, Parush destabilizes and reorganizes Yiddish literary history in such a way that Shomer, rather than the maskilic Yiddish writers who constitute its early canonical figures, inevitably emerges as one of its founding fathers.

89. Shomer-Batsheva, Undzer foter shomer, 62.
90. Niger, “A naye revyze,” 35. Iris Parush distinguishes between the “old reading women”—consumers of traditional Yiddish texts to whom Dik’s mayse bikhithekh (chapbooks) appealed—and the “new reading women,” who gravitated toward Shomer’s escapist fiction. She thus differentiates between Shomer’s “modern” (or transitional) audience and Dik’s traditional one.
92. Parush, 211.
The Soviet Debate

By far the most explosive rehearsal of the controversy emerging out The Judgment of Shomer occurred between the Soviet critics Avrom Veviorke and Meir Viner. Veviorke's attempts to rehabilitate Shomer were first introduced in two articles in Di royte velt, which he then expanded in a long essay in his volume Revizye (Revision). Veviorke attributes Sholem Aleichem's contempt for Shomer to the class struggle between the bourgeois tastes of an emerging Yiddishist intelligentsia and the working masses. He argues that the point of departure for any analysis of Shomer ought to take into account his audience: "If Shomer himself has no worth or interest for literary research, at least hundreds of thousands of his readers must. He was the first Yiddish writer who had (and created) a mass of readers in the fullest sense of the word...Thus, even if Shomer himself, the writer, is not of interest to us, then at least Shomer's social base must be... On the basis of demographics alone, then, Veviorke accords Shomer a central place in the canon. He adds elsewhere: “The time has come to shed new light on The Judgment of Shomer and to conduct a historical retrospective and rehabilitation about that which was positive in him...This can only be accomplished if we separate The Judgment of Shomer from his socio-historical function, if we are prepared to recognize his social optimism...despite his primitive form.” According to Veviorke, Shomer's writing was part of a social mission to provide a welcome distraction for the working masses from their poverty and suffering. His happy, improbable endings—the cause of so much controversy and criticism—provided joy to his readers by fulfilling the moral fantasy of allowing them to believe that goodness ultimately prevails and evil is punished. In so doing, Shomer provided “the abused servant girl” with encouragement and hope by “driving her from the kitchen to enchanted palaces.” In Shomer's happy endings, Veviorke sees the writer's “deep faith in the lowest classes,” his commitment to the creation of a “class consciousness that must in the end set things right so that the swindle... sooner or later gets its due,” and his rejection of “the epidemic of sad endings found in the newly fashionable novels that is a type of fatalism which he checked with optimism.” Veviorke suggests that Sholem Aleichem's defense of aesthetic standards in The Judgment of Shomer was largely a distraction from the larger ideological campaign between bour-

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91. Revizye, 7-8.
97. Ibid., 115.
geois (hence reactionary) and progressive forces in contemporary Eastern European Jewish society that remained engaged in a pitched battle for the Jewish street:

Shomer appealed to the lowest classes of the shitetl who sought an outlet from their social position. Sholem Aleichem came in the name of a Jewish middle class which was already entrenched in the Yehupetsetes [the cities], already socially and culturally on a higher level, but which was at the same time in the hold of Jewish medieval modesty...Shomer represented youth and servant-girls whereas Sholem Aleichem represented students of Torah and pious virgins, the learned householders to whom his theory of...the Jewish novel appealed.98

Veviorke here probes the link between the development of Yiddish proletarian literature and shunest. He sees Shomer as a critical "transfer station" for nineteenth-century Yiddish literature whose "raels lead to proletarian literature in one direction and to petit-bourgeois literature in the other."99

Whereas Shomer and later proletarian writers shared the same social base and offered a vision of revolutionary societal change, Sholem Aleichem "demanded that a Jewish literary work contain a Jewish idea, yidishkeyt (Jewishness) as his class interpreted it."100 Veviorke explains: "[since] Shomer was the liberator of the masses from the Jewish photocracy and the rabbis,"101 "the householders, who saw it as their duty to protect the Jewish vineyard, wanted to annihilate his influence and trumpe up a trial against him."102 Veviorke's central claim, then, was that the fight waged by Sholem Aleichem against Shomer was not based on principles of literary quality at all. Rather, it reflected an ideological dispute between the muted class struggle inherent in Shomer's brand of escapist pulp fiction and Sholem Aleichem's own establishment values.103

99. Revizre, 8.
100. Ibid., 60.
101. Ibid., 54.
102. Ibid., 56.
103. For more on Veviorke's understanding of the way petit-bourgeois tastes determined the borders of the emerging Yiddish canon, see his essay "Arop mitn kleynbirlgenkhn kheyrem" (Away with the Petit-Bourgeois Iban), April 10, 1927. My summary above ignores other aspects of Veviorke's close literary analysis, in which he attempts to deconstruct many of Sholem Aleichem's critiques. For instance, he accords great significance to Shomer's early stories, especially those in the series featuring the beggar Yudke Shmerkes, which "have no connection to shunest...Among them are several that have great literary, historical, and cultural worth, with portraits of characters from Jewish life back then...and sharp folk-humor and biting satire directed against those with status and power...It was not an accident that they were loved by the so-called lower classes and hated in respectable society. Yudke told stories that he
Veviorke’s defense of Shomer prompted a swift and harsh response by the noted Soviet critic Meir Viner. In two articles published in Moscow’s *Enes* in February 1932, then at a symposium of the Institute for Jewish Proletarian Culture (April 25–30, 1932), and finally in a long essay in the volume *Problems of Criticism*, Viner asks: “Is Shomer really a writer whose rehabilitation ought to be connected to the demands of great Bolshevik art?” Offended by Veviorke’s suggestion that Shomer and his school could be seen as precursors of proletarian literature, Viner argues that Shomer’s ‘happy endings and unbelievable plots’ were themselves reactionary because they indoctrinated the working class to an escapism brand of pulp fiction that promoted the lowest aesthetic standards of “shmireray” (scribbling) and diverted attention away from class struggle: “The struggle on behalf of Shomer is a struggle on behalf of trash (shund) in our contemporary proletarian literature. And the fight against the rehabilitation of shund is a fight against such trashy contraband in our proletarian cultural revolution.” He adds: “The ‘happy endings are an example of the reactionary tendencies of the petit-bourgeoisie of that time. They had the function of dampening the thought of the masses, and halting the development of social consciousness among workers...’Trashy literature has a similar function today in capitalist countries.” Though Viner admits that Sholem Aleichem’s program for the development of the ‘Jewish novel’ contained within it a “reactionary nationalistic streak wedded to national ‘originality’...one must also recognize in it the struggle for the realistic novel of self-criticism that stood against both thievish from other sources and ‘trashy [shundish]”

heard from the people: funny and tragic stories (about the abuses of the rich).” (‘Shomer un shomerism,’ Elsewhere, he claims that the attack on Shomer’s use of Germanisms was overblown, given that many of Shomer’s works were composed in a folk-language that was “juicy and popular” and that ultimately enriched the language. (‘Shomer un shomerism,’ 112). Although many Yiddish writers employed Germanisms in their writing, Veviorke asserts that Sholem Aleichem chooses only to criticize Shomer. He then implies that Sholem Aleichem is guilty of hypocrisy, given that his own works are filled with Slavicisms.


attempts to polish palaces of fantasy. Viner rejects Veviorka's distinction between a “good” Shomer, represented by a handful of early short stories, and the bulk of his literary production, which was represented by his sentimental romances. He cites Shomer's own words from the introduction to his novel Der kheyrem (1892) (“I do not write for you [the reader], but rather for your money”) as evidence that he was a crass opportunist whose works “have no ideological or artistic worth” and who deserves to remain in the “garbage pail of history.” The dispute between Veviorka and Viner demonstrates that Soviet critics were just as divided among themselves as were their Yiddishist colleagues. Both groups used the contest between Sholem Aleichem and Shomer to work through ongoing ambivalences about the place and function of popular fiction and the way they related to contested narratives about the borders of the Yiddish canon.

A Modernist Intervention

The most sophisticated artistic effort to rehabilitate Shomer in the interwar period was undertaken by the American Yiddish modernist poet and literary critic Yankev Glatshyn in his poem “Shomer” (1930) and in his essay “Unzer elter feter Shomer” (Our Great Uncle Shomer). That these works appeared on the anniversaries of Shomer's death suggests that Glatshyn imagined them as revisionist interventions designed to shift the terms of critical discourse about Shomer.

“Shomer” was composed in the same period as another Glatshyn poem of literary homage, “Moyshe leyhs koll” dedicated to the memory of the modernist troubadour Moyshe Leyb Halpern. Though Glatshyn is interested in exploring creative debts in both, the focus of “Moyshe leyhs koll” was on the creative personality of Halpern, whereas “Shomer” was more concerned with exploring the bond between its subject and its readers. What did a leading modernist poet of interwar New York have in common with

110. Ibid., 246.
111. Ibid., 262.
113. “Unzer elter feter Shomer,” Morga zurna (24 November 1930); republished in Glatshyn's Prost in posht (New York, 1976), 140-144 and in Shomer's zikh, Unzer elter feter Shomer, 224-227. All citations here are from the reprint of the article in Prost in posht.
114. See Fun mayn ganzer mi, 276-277.
the literature's most legendary transgressor against literary propriety? It was one thing for modernists to seek out and creatively betray folk sources, quite another to seek kinships with accused peddlers of trash fiction. Nevertheless, in the same way that Sholem Aleichem's The Judgment of Shomer was more about Sholem Aleichem's efforts to eke out a place for his own brand of writing as it was about the accused, so too was Glatshetyen's poem as much a reflexive vehicle through which he sought to comment on the condition of Yiddish in America and the fate of his own modernist enterprise as it was about its subject.

The poem opens by drawing our attention to Shomer's style, both through its inflated, Germanized diction ("Der mond bashtralt mit varer libe dos shtikt me..."") and the overly sentimentalized atmosphere it creates. At first, the diction seems designed to mock Shomer, especially when the speaker shifts in the second line to a more colloquial contemporary Yiddish. This linguistic destabilization poses an immediate interpretive challenge. Is it meant to ridicule Shomer by playing up his style, or to call attention to different registers of language, breaking down distinctions between appropriate and "inappropriate" Yiddish, a favorite modernist technique? Glatshetyen confuses matters further by blurring the boundary between fantasy and reality, as when the speaker compares himself in the opening stanza to an "absurd hero of yours, a self-description that seems to make him as unbelievable as one of Shomer's sentimental and unbelievable fictional creations. At one and the same time, the poem seems to mock Shomer's style and identify with it. Though Glatshetyen was only thirty-four when "Shomer" first appeared, the speaker's references to his age ("these temples of mine are turning gray") and to the performative burden of the contemporary Yiddish writer ("I am breaking from the exertion of playing the prince among your maids and teamsters..."; "I walked on stilts through the Jewish street, wore a dress coat and top hat and said G'day, all in order to perfume the stench...") point to an artist who feels himself prematurely anachronistic. The poet-

115. Novershtern disputes Janet Hadda's suggestion that Glatshetyen's poem was an intervention into the aforementioned dispute between Veytorke and Viner. Though Veytorke's articles about Shomer in Di.myto velt (1920) may have influenced Glatshetyen, "Shomer" was composed before the debate between the Soviet critics was published. Rather, Novershtern posits that Glatshetyen may have been provoked more by Veytorke's harsh criticism of his own hizik (introspective) modernist poet group. By calling attention in the poem to Shomer's inflated diction and his fantastic plots, Glatshetyen argues that hizik is the inherit of this interest in language play and resistance to realism. See Novershtern, 2:17-248 (n.15).

116. As early as Glatshetyen's maiden collection of poems in 1921, we find hints (as in the poem "Arteriosclerosis" or in the section "Passing") of the young poet's fear of being devoured by forces beyond his control. See also Jeffrey Shandler's discussion of post-vernacular Yiddish in his Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture (University of California, 2005) in which he suggests that well before the
ic persona that emerges through the speaker allows Glatshteyn to externalize his own creative pressures and anxieties, as when he constructs a neologism around the very subject of the poem, shund: “Ikh hob shoyn bald durkhgeschundevet mayn lebn” (“I’ve already trashed my way through my life”). This gesture exposes the fear that his own modernist experimentation might meet the same fate as Shomer’s popular fantasies. At the same time that the poet-speaker casts himself as an outlandish figure (“Don Quixotic, like a hero of yours”), he identifies with “one of the heroes of your romances in two parts” because the modernist enterprise strives for a similar escapist experience. What, Glatshteyn teases us, could be more quixotic, more beyond belief, more outrageous, than a Yiddish high-modernist in America?

The imagined bond between Shomer’s sentimental fantasies and Glatshteyn’s modernist escapism allows the poet-speaker to acclaim Shomer as “liber, gotzeltiger elter-feter mayner” (dear, blessed, great uncle of mine). By inviting Shomer back into the founding family of Yiddish literature, Glatshteyn evokes and then expands the borders of the family constellation set up by Sholem Aleichem when he proclaimed Abramovitch the grandfather of modern Yiddish literature and himself its legitimate heir as grandson (Peretz was referred to by a later critic as “the father of another literary family”). Since there is a distinction between a grandfather as an idealized figure and the progenitor of a direct line of descendants, and a fun-loving uncle who may provide occasional relief from propriety, the speaker’s public celebration of his filial relations with Shomer marks a revision of the Yiddish meta-narrative away from the canonical grandfather-grandson myth to an extended family of cousins. By adding this link to the founding genealogy of Yiddish, Glatshteyn portrays Shomer as an influence (conscious or not) on all later Yiddish writers. In this, Glatshteyn himself may have been influenced by the Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky, who, in 1923, moved away from a linear approach to defining the dynamics of literary influence by suggesting that “in the history of art the legacy is transmitted not from father to son, but from uncle to nephew.” Ultimately what this suggests is that it is necessary to break free from the established reading of canons by offering counter-canons. Glatshteyn’s poetic homage to Shomer as uncle underlines just how knotty and convoluted literary dynamics are, and seeks nothing less than to trace the origins of his brand of Yiddish modernism back to shund, since both ultimately reject the requirement (embraced by Abramovitch and Sholem Aleichem) that Yiddish literature represent Jewish reality:

Holocaust, Yiddish writers were self-consciously obsessed with the fate of the language.
Like you, I wanted to flee from *Fishtke the Lame.*
You, conjurer, beat the stone of Jewish life
And out flowed the hot tears of warm,
unhappy servant girls far away from home,
of the orphans, poor things, who moistened your golden pages.
Those who were repressed, humiliated
by the boss in the silken caftan,
kissed and fondled in the dark.
Along with the holy Sabbath, you provided a little peace
for their tired, worn-out feet.
They sat in the corner, and read with their lips, like mutes,
and sobbed and dreamed of true love.
O comfort giver, transformer of wretched days and nights,
you blew incense into the stew-filled air and ennobled those cursed days
with the angel-purse heart of your hero...

Glatshteyn here embraces Shomer’s anti-mimetic thematic while also
sketching a portrait of Shomer’s readership and the social function of his
writing. He imagines Shomer sacrificing his potential as a serious writer for
the sake of his audience, evidence of a true people’s artist. The poem forces
recognition that Shomer’s work was a refuge for his readers, especially
women who were overworked and without means of social advancement.
Thus, Shomer’s *shund* was not the corrosive, destructive force imagined by
Sholem Aleichem, but rather provided a form of cultural resistance from the
vagaries of daily life. The speaker’s rejection of realist texts depicting Jewish
poverty such as Abramovitch’s *Fishtke the Lame* (1869/1888) is an aversion
to allowing Jewish social reality to define the boundaries of Yiddish literature
and the imagination of its readers. He identifies with Shomer’s ability to
dampen the stench of reality with the perfumed “incense” of his chap-books. Far from being an enemy of the people, as Sholem Aleichem would
have it, Shomer, through his decision to provide an escape to those who
were economically and physically abused by the Jewish establishment, was
“a comfort-giver” and leader to his generation. The therapeutic function of
evacist fiction here is celebrated as serving the emotional needs of the
people, while at the same time laying the groundwork for a non-mimetic Yiddish
literary aesthetics of which Glatshteyn’s modernism is a direct descen-
dant.

As the poem eventually reveals, the speaker’s concern about the rele-
ance of the Yiddish writer in America is symbiotically related to the disapp-
pearance of the Yiddish reader, “our dead inheritance.” If Shomer was
responsible, as some critics have suggested, for the creation of a mass read-
ership, then his exclusion from the canon marked the beginning of the end of
this same popular audience. When Shomer followed his own readers across
the Atlantic, he unwittingly participated in a process that would, within a
generation, witness the disappearance of a mass audience for Yiddish cul-
ture as the children of these immigrants adjusted to their condition as
English-speaking Americans. For Glatshteyn, the evaporation of new, young sources of Yiddish readers was not only a sign of sociological transformation but of moral redefinition as well. While Shomer's female reader could only fantasize about true love when stealing away with one of his potholders on the Sabbath, her granddaughters in America no longer need Shomer because in America they were free to act upon their amorous desires: "Ober dayane dinstmeydin zenen shoyn mer nisht umgliklek / zey hohn gezeyer / un zeyer tekhner varelbn zikh oyt grilsndik english in di mytoboln." (But your servant-girls are no longer unhappy - they married up - and their daughters practice true love in grating English in automobiles.) Glatshteyn passes moral judgment through his diction. He invents the ironic verb "varelbn zikh" (to indicate a fleeting sexual encounter), which contrasts sharply with the purity of the poem's opening line (in which Shomer's readers dream, if sentimentally, of old-fashioned true love under the moonlight). Glatshteyn suggests that the social and material improvement resulting in the move across the ocean was accompanied by a betrayal of the values of Jewish modesty. Where Shomer's chapbooks provided innocent escapist fantasy, he is no longer relevant because the subsequent, not-so-innocent generations of young Jewish readers can act out their desires without him. Furthermore, the choice here to replace the more intimate Yiddish term for marriage "khaisen Gehat" with the Germanism "gehryratet" underscores the desire of young Jews in America to "marry up," not only out of poverty but perhaps, more snobbishly, out of Jewishness as well. More to the point, to the speaker's ear it is not Yiddish that jars one's sensibilities but English, now a symbol of cheap arriviste mores. From the poem's perspective, immigrant English has replaced Yiddish as the new jargon of an American Jewish life, which privileges self-gratification over self-refinement, individualism over community. Glatshteyn implies that Yiddish only functions as a meaningful language for modern Jews so long as they behave and think of themselves as Jews. Once this self-consciousness is gone, Germanisms are poetically invoked to symbolize the new idiom of the culturally and morally deracinated. Shomer often invoked Germanisms in his fiction to mock the assimilationist pretensions of an aspiring Jewish "high society" (he rarely used them to characterize the way simple Jews or women spoke). Glatshteyn builds upon this legacy to show the ways in which language signals a move from Jewish to "Gentile" behavior and self-definition. What such comments provoke is the understanding that Yiddish readers bear part of the responsibility for Shomer having been given an ignominious "donkey's burial," because a people that does not honor its writers ultimately lacks self-respect. This speaks directly to Glatshteyn's anxieties about the fate of the Yiddish writer in America. Indeed, the speaker predicts that he will suffer the same fate as his great-uncle. If Shomer's popular readership evaporated as the tastes of Yiddish readers grew more sophisticated in the 1890s, then the danger to Glatshteyn is from the opposite end of the spectrum. He sees
threats both within and without, as Yiddish literary high culture (and especially his brand of Yiddish modernism) finds itself challenged not only from a lack of serious Yiddish readers, but also from the communist Yiddish left via Proletkult ("they are building gallows for us all/. . . . and mocking us with their red tongues"). By labeling those who besiege him because his modernist verse is not enough engaged in the class struggle for the Jewish street as modern-day Haidamaks,118 he transforms them from the radicals they imagine themselves to be into the cultural reactionaries they are.

The poet-speaker’s imagined relations with Shomer are a natural outgrowth of their shared experience of being labeled irrelevant in their respective ages. If early Yiddish critics scolded Shomer’s work for being nothing more than fantasy, this charge is internalized by Glatshteyn to such a degree that the modernist Yiddish poet in America feels himself to be no less an absurdity than Shomer’s outrageous protagonists. Both are, so to speak, beyond the pale. This allows for the poem’s remarkable concluding tribute to Shomer as “Du, unzer cynuneysiker / yidisher naïveté un far ale tsaytn eybiker modernist” (You, our one and only / Yiddish naïf and for all time eternal modernist). While the yoking together of naïveté with modernism may seem odd, it underlines the extent to which Glatshteyn used Shomer to prompt a reconsideration of distinctions between high and low. Was it Glatshteyn’s modernism that was naïve in remaining true to itself despite the absence of an audience and a surplus of sentimentality? Or was it American Jewry that was naïve in believing that, in translating itself out of its Jewi-

118 Haidamaks were roving bands of armed peasants in Polish-Ukraine responsible for pogroms against Jews in the seventeenth century.
buried the hatchet long ago in the next world while critics continue their partisan bickering here on earth. He then attempts to provide a comparative perspective on the controversy by referencing another contemporaneous literary controversy of the late nineteenth century, that launched by Mark Twain against James Fenimore Cooper. In 1895 (seven years after the appearance of The Judgment of Shomer) Twain—the American Sholem Aleichem—published "Fenimore Cooper’s Literary Sins," in which he attempted to tarnish his colleague's reputation by accusing him of corrupting literary taste by providing unrealistic characterization, plots, and dialogue, and demonstrating a lack of original style. Glatshteyn’s audience might have recognized these charges as remarkably similar to those that Sholem Aleichem had used to indict Shomer. Despite the similarities between The Judgment and "Fenimore Cooper’s Literary Sins," Glatshteyn observes that more than forty years later, the American literary canon proved itself self-confident and elastic enough to make room for both Twain and Fenimore Cooper within its ranks of leading nineteenth-century writers. Surely the Yiddish canon, Glatshteyn intimates, could eke out an honorary footstool for Shomer: "Without a doubt, this phenomenal creator who authored the best-sellers of his day cannot be chased entirely from our literary palace. Just the opposite: in a greater literature, such an interesting figure would already have rows of monographs and biographies [about him] that would provide a helpful portrait of Shomer in the context of the generation that devoured his novels."  

119) Like other critics before him, Glatshteyn pressed his case for Shomer’s rehabilitation through an acknowledgment of his importance in having created a broad, popular base of readers that extended beyond the ranks of intellectuals whose maskilic fiction rarely reached beyond that rarefied group: "Yiddish literature in his time was masculine. Shomer also spoke to the Yiddish woman."  

120) By calling attention to the relationship between gender and readership, Glatshteyn casts Shomer as an early populist who liberated Yiddish fiction from a male elite and helped to transform it into a truly popular forum of national culture.

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120) Ibid, Niger, who was at the forefront of those resisting rehabilitation of Shomer, sharply contested Glatshteyn’s conclusions about Shomer and the creation of the female reader: "From a historical standpoint, this is simply incorrect. [JM] Dik spoke to Yiddish women much earlier. It was Dik—not Shomer—who was the first to create both a [Yiddish] reader and a [Yiddish] woman reader." Niger went on to suggest that Glatshteyn’s belief that Yiddish literature owes Shomer a debt is misguided. "The same thing was said by Leydese. But both are at such a distance from the Yiddish popular reader—from Shomer’s reader—that they really cannot judge...[this is a type of reverse snobism. It contains within it a kind of literary slumming.]" Niger, "Shomers mishpat—af Sholem Alekhmen," Di isukunft (January 1917), 45.
Glatshteyn contended that Sholem Aleichem cooked up an attack on Shomer not so much because he was offended by what he was producing, but because he wanted ownership over the readers that Shomer had created. By discrediting Shomer as a writer, the young upstart hoped to gain a ready-made mass market for his own career and to reinvent himself as a “folks-shrayber” (a writer for the people). Glatshteyn’s essay suggests that Sholem Aleichem (and his defenders) did not fully appreciate that the tension between high and popular fiction is a necessity for a healthy literary system, and that by attempting to eradicate figures such as Shomer, Yiddish literature now belatedly was paying the price: “Where is he now, this mature, intelligent, ideal reader, who hungers and thirsts after our words with passion? How did we allow that reader to slip away?”

The result of the campaign by the self-styled guardians of the canon against Shomer and popular fiction demonstrated an ongoing disconnect between the elite and the street over the function of literature. For the latter, literature is a form of entertainment and escapism, whereas for the former it is an aesthetic calling. Ultimately, Glatshteyn—whose modernist lyrics were certainly not intended for unsophisticated readers—recognized that the sustenance of a literary high culture appreciative of the type of writing he practiced depended on the concomitant development of a mass base from which to cultivate readers. According to Glatshteyn, the delegitimization of this mass, consumerist Yiddish-speaking base through attacks on lowbrow popular fiction did not improve the fate of Yiddish literature but placed it in precarious danger: “Shomer never pretended to enter the salon where intellectuals sit playing chess, debating the state of the world. But if you watched closely you might notice some of those very same chess players sneaking into the kitchen for a break with the maids to play out Shomer’s fantastic yarns until dawn.”

He deflates the pretensions of the guardians of high canon by accusing them of hypocrisy; though they criticize Shomer’s works as beneath their dignity in public, they still enjoy its forbidden pleasures in private. Ironically, then, it was the modernist Glatshteyn who hoped to provoke renewed attention to the imperative of popular fiction, both in Shomer’s day and our own, as a necessary component of a healthy republic of letters.

122. Ibid., 134.
123. Of course, Glatshteyn was well aware that the thinning of a market for sophisticated Yiddish literature could not be blamed on elite attitudes toward mass tastes, but was more the result of linguistic assimilation in both America and Eastern Europe, the Russification of Soviet Jewry, and the politicization of the Jewish street. In the same way that Shomer’s readers were comforted by his fantastic tales that resisted reality, so too does Glatshteyn’s explanation of his own fall into irrelevance draw on a kind of sentimental comfort that ignores the more uncomfortable social realities of the moment.
Though Ruth Wisse’s *The Modern Jewish Canon*—the study that inspired this festschrift—has very little to say about sub-canonical (or popular) Jewish literature, I suggest that it too is part of the process that began in earnest with *The Judgment of Shomer* when Sholem Aleichem initiated conversation about the legitimate borders of Yiddish fiction. *The Judgment* provided her—and the rest of us—with a rudimentary (if imperfect) vocabulary for the Jewish canonizing project that anticipated her attention to the link between language and identity, and the universal resonances of Jewish particularism. When the editors of this volume approached her about publishing a collection of essays in her honor, Wisse’s natural instinct was to propose that we organize it around the theme of argument. That the argument initiated by Sholem Aleichem 120 years ago remains relevant to the way we understand the modern Jewish canon suggests that the jury of *The Judgment of Shomer* is still deliberating.

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124. The exception to this is her discussion of Leon Uris’ *Exodus*, the best-selling American novel about the birth of Israel. Wisse shows that even *Exodus*—despite its sentimental romance and clichéd characters—was serious about popularizing the story of a transformative moment in contemporary Jewish experience, something that Sholem Aleichem accuses Shomer’s novels of failing to do. Jewish literary history would benefit from increased attention to the modern Jewish best-seller in order to complement Wisse’s study with the contours of a popular canon.

The Judgment of Shomer
or
The Jury Trial of All of Shomer’s Novels

Transcribed word for word
by Sholem Aleichem

Translated from the Yiddish and annotated by Justin Cammy

Berdichev
Jacob Sheftil, Publisher
1888

Strike the capitals so that the thresholds quake.¹
(Numos 9:1)

Fleece the flock and the lambs tremble.
(Yiddish proverb)

My thanks to Alon Astro and Avraham Novershtern for their assistance on questions of translation. Olga Litvak, Alyssa Quint, Dara Horn, and Ernest Benz were kind enough to read a draft of the translation and to offer their advice. Titles of works mentioned by Sholem Aleichem first appear both in Yiddish transliteration and in my English translation; subsequent mention of the same work appears only in translation. I preserved Sholem Aleichem’s editorial decision to have Shomer’s name appear in bold throughout the text. [JC]

¹ The full verse reads: “I saw my Lord standing by the altar and He said Strike the capitals so that the thresholds quake, and make an end of the first of them all. And I will slay the last of them with the sword; not one of them shall escape, and not one of them shall survive.” (Jewish Publication Society translation)
In a large hall, at the head of a green table, sits the presiding judge, an old man. Two other magistrates are seated on either side. The prosecutor, an irascible young man with fiery eyes, is seated on one side, to the left, at a small table. The defense counsel, a good-natured, spirited young man, is opposite him, to the right, also at a small table. The secretary is a little bit further away at a large table, upon which are scattered dozens of the "most interesting novels by Shomer," and also various works by Abramovitch, Linetski, Dik, Spektor, Buchbinder, Bekerman, Ulrich Kalmus, Tsim-
and dramatist, most productive during the 1870s and 1880s. His writings appeared in such publications as Kolner kibbutz and Yidisch (edited by Linczuk). His play, A zeltene bris un a genarte khasone (A Rare Circumcision and a Fraudulent Wedding), Odessa, 1871; Warsaw, 1882) was an anti-Hasidic farce composed in the earthy dialect of Polish Jewry.

9. Khayim Bunim Tsimbler (dates unknown), well-known wedding musician and performer, and author of several collections of chapbooks, including Di generalshe, oder der paster benyahood (The General’s Wife, or The Only Son, 1887).

10. Ozyer Bloshteyn (1840-98), in his day one of the most popular writers of trashy Yiddish novels. From 1878, he published more than fifty novels and stories. He vigorously defended Yiddish against accusations that it was nothing more than a Jewish jargon. He also published a Russian-Yiddish dictionary, and Russian translations of the weekday and High Holiday prayer books, as well as of the Passover Haggadah.

11. Moyshe Marakhovski (dates unknown), author of several collections of satiric poetry, including Der elister yosed (The Lonely Orphan, 1872); Higode in haynhlber lsyt (The Contemporary Haggadah, 1885), and Yosevitlske lider a kritik in forzn fun dem lebn (Holiday Poems: A Verse-Critique of Life, 1886).

12. Sholom Aleichem uses the term zhargon, or “jargon,” throughout The Judgment of Shomer to refer to Yiddish. This was an accepted term for Yiddish in his day. However, in certain places where Sholom Aleichem did not intend the pejorative connotations that the term carries with it today, I elected to translate zhargon as Yiddish. Dan Miron explains: “... it was only at the end of the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century that the language had become universally known as Yiddish—the language of the Jews (Yidn). In the previous century it had first been called Yidisher daytish (Judeo-German) and, later (until the time of Sholom Aleichem and Peretz), Zhargon (“jargon”), the former name designating the language as a corrupt German spoken by Jews and the latter degrading it further to the class of sublanguages. Incoherent mechanisms of linguistic communication, gibberation,” A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century (1996), 47. Max Weinreich notes that though zhargon was used by proponents of enlightenment (maskilim) pejoratively, Yiddish writers such as Sholom Aleichem employed it neutrally until the language wars between Hebrew and Yiddish rendered the term entirely pejorative. See History of the Yiddish Language (Chicago 1980), 315-27.
who is aware of his own importance. The secretary rises and begins to read out the indictment:

"It has been nearly twenty years since Yiddish began to show signs of becoming a language, to stretch its limbs and demonstrate some forward movement. Three giants in Poland—Abramovitch, Linetski, Goldfaden—and Isaac Meir Dik in Lithuania boldly stood Yiddish on its own two feet, and carried it over from the language of Bible translations in the Tsevrerene to a living literature, from the Bore-mayse to the novel, from the hasidic hagiography of Shitchei ha-Besht to poetry, from the supplicatory prayers of Tkhines to satire. These four giants, these great individuals, forged a new language and breathed the European spirit into our old jargon. And masses of new readers sprung up! The public took up Yiddish with enthusiasm, with all the passion of the Jewish people. There was barely a Jewish home in which people were not clutching their sides with laughter, reading Linetski's Dos poyleshe yingl (The Polish Boy), published in the

13. Sholem Aleichem's reference to Poland and Lithuania in this line does not refer to the current borders of these countries but to a basic north-south dichotomy in the geography of Jewish Eastern Europe under the Russian tsars. Poland included much of Jewish Ukraine (and was seen to be far more under the influence of Hasidism), while Lithuania included significant parts of Belarus (and was understood to be the territory of Misnagdim, or rationalist tradition).

14. Abraham (Avrom) Goldfaden (1840-1905), Yiddish dramatist, widely acknowledged as the founder of modern Yiddish theater and a celebrated folk poet. In describing the modernization of Yiddish literature Sholem Aleichem deliberately leaves the Yiddish theater unmentioned, a telling sign of his bourgeois literary tastes.

15. Tsevrerene (lit. "Come and See," 1622), popular Yiddish adaptation of narrative sections of the Bible. It was the most significant book for generations of Ashkenazi Jewish women.

16. Bore-mayse, Yiddish expression for a fantastic or unbelievable tale. Sholem Aleichem is referring here to the Yiddish chivalric romance by Eljah Levita (Elye Bokher), Bore-bukh (1507). Several chapbook editions of Bore-bukh appeared later under the title Bore-mayse. Over time, the proximity of "bore" to "bobe" (the Yiddish word for grandmother) transformed Bore-mayse from the title of a specific work in the pre-modern Yiddish literary canon into a common expression for the types of stories grandmothers tell, or old wives' tales.

17. Shitchei ha-Besht (In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov), hagiographic tales first published in 1814-15 about the life and spiritual achievements of Israel ben Eliezer Ba'al Shem Tov (c. 1700-60), the founder of Hasidism.

18. Tkhines, Yiddish supplicatory prayers recited mainly by Ashkenazi women. Eastern European varieties of Tkhines were published in small pamphlets and provide invaluable insight into women's religious lives. Tkhines were among the most widespread publications of Yiddish devotional literature.

19. See note 4. Alyssa Quint has argued that Sholem Aleichem shows his distance from the reading habits of the masses by overstating their interest in such manifesta-
first Yiddish newspaper *Kol-mevaser*, edited by Tsederboym; did not sing
the immortal sweet songs of Goldfaden; did not ingest, declaim, and per-
form by heart the wonderful scenes from Abramovitch's *Di takse*. In short,
it was a bright moment in the history of the language, a fortunate slice of
time in Jewish life in general that Jews still recall with fondness.

"But bright sun brings its own dark shadows. Mushrooms sprout in the
same spot as fruit trees, and one can always find thorns next to roses. In
every literature, the cripple who has not succeeded in anything follows in
the steps of great talent. After the most beautiful hero, after the lion, a small
worm creeps in. If a great talent in the form of a genius were to exist forever
and protect literature under its wings, a worm would cease to have any rea-
son to live. Although it happens infrequently, a large worm sometimes
develops out of a small worm, and its damage is so great that the public
starts looking for ways to smoke it out, along with any memory of it. But this
doesn't always happen so smoothly. In our case, the famous writers men-
tioned earlier put down their weapons, and the people gradually began to
forget them." At that point, small worms began to emerge from their holes.

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20. *Kol-mevaser* (The Herald), Yiddish supplement to the first Hebrew weekly *Ha-
Meltis* (The Advocate). *Kol-mevaser* first appeared in 1862; from 1869-72 it was
published on its own. As the first modern Yiddish paper in Russia, *Kol-mevaser*
played a significant role in raising the prestige of Yiddish by demonstrating
that it was more than a popular folk "jargon," and could function as a medium for
modern intellectual and literary discussion. Alexander Tsederboym (1816-93),
pioneering figure of the Jewish press in Russia, published *Ha-Meltis*, beginning in
1860; in 1881 he began to edit the Yiddish newspaper *Yidisher folksblat*.

21. *Di takse*, oder der bande shtot batey toyres (The Meat Tax, or the Band of
Community Benefactors, 1869). S.Y. Abramovitch's satiric drama that took aim at
the corruption of community leaders in Berdichev.

22. A reference to the liberalization of attitudes toward the Jews during the early reign
of Tsar Alexander II (1855-81). Alexander II's ascension to the throne was a
moment of great hope for Jewish enlighteners, who felt that their internal efforts
at modernization of Jewish society would be reciprocated by their integration
into Russian society. A wave of pogroms against Russian Jewry beginning in the
1870s and peaking in 1881-82 following the tsar's assassination destroyed the
idealist of the Haskalah and marked the beginning of a chaotic period that
witnessed mass Jewish emigration from the Russian empire, the disintegration of
the shtetl, rapid urbanization, and the rise of modern Jewish politics.

23. A possible reference to the gap between the publication of S.Y. Abramovitch's
*Kitser masnues bloyonin hashidish* (The Abridged Travels of Benjamin the Third,
1878) and a revised version of *Dos khayme mentshele* (The Little Man, 1879) and
his drama *Der priziv* (The Draft, 1884). In that five-year period, Abramovitch did
not publish any new works in Yiddish.
They laid eggs and multiplied. All types of cockroaches, one insect after another, crept out of the corners and infected Yiddish with such ugliness that it would need to purify and cleanse itself for quite some time until it managed to return to respectability.

"Yiddish writers, writers of the people," fabricators of sentimental romances came pouring forth like sand and garbage, and Yiddish was suddenly overflowing with novels. What kind of novels? The world was flooded with them, and they dulled the literary taste of the reading public to such an extent that no one dreamt of touching anything else! But that is not the end of it. Every reader became a writer: many young good-for-nothings proclaimed themselves novelists! It was enough for anybody to read a book, a foreign novel, and soon enough he proclaimed himself a novelist. He just changes the names of the heroes, slips in a few Jewish names, and sells this "most interesting novel in four parts with an epilogue" for the price of a bagel to the latest itinerant peddler who happens by. The itinerant peddler publishes it, the young snot becomes a popular writer, a novelist, the masses accept this shoddy merchandise, and there is no stopping things.

"The greatest, the most productive, the richest of all of these cockroaches, centipedes, and worms is the so-called novelist Shomer, our accused.

"This fellow took it upon himself, and not as a joke, to inundate Yiddish with his unbelievable, insubstantial novels, with their wild, strange concoctions that are beneath any possible criticism, and that are as dangerous as poison to the reader. He has corrupted the sensibilities of his readers by providing them with dreadful fantasies, wild ideas, and heart-rending scenes that our people would have had no idea about had they not been exposed to them in his works.

"This became problematic for our community representatives, and they named a commission to investigate more than fifty such novels by Shomer. The commission came to the following conclusions:

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21. Sholem Aleichem's repeated use of the term "folks-shrayber" (from the Russian narodny) is particularly challenging to translate. I am uncomfortable rendering it as "popular writer," if only because Sholem Aleichem did not interpret "popular" in the way we do today, as necessarily low-brow. Rather, I prefer Miron's suggestion of 'writer of the people;' despite its clumsiness in English: "A folks-shrayber writes for the people, about the people, and in order to educate the people while entertaining them." See A Traveler Disguised, 276 (n77). The translator encounters the same problem with Sholem Aleichem's frequent invocation of the concept "undzer folks-literatur" ("our literature for the people"), which he understood as literature intended for the entire population, not just for a highly educated elite. The Yiddish "folk" cannot be translated into English either as "folk" (which sounds too primitive) or as "national" (because at that time only Hebrew was understood to have the status of a "national" language). Moreover, Russian does not use the term "narodnaya literatura" but rather "narodnoe krest'yevo" (literally, "folk creativity"), which is used as a synonym for the internationalism "folklore."
1. Almost all of his novels are, pardon the expression, stolen from foreign literatures.
2. All his novels are of the same cut.
3. This so-called novelist does not provide a realistic, authentic picture of Jewish life.
4. As a result, his novels have no connection to the Jews whatsoever.
5. These romances ignite the imagination, but provide no ethical direction, no moral.
6. They contain obscenity and cynicism.
7. They are very poorly constructed.
8. The author appears to be an ignoramus.
9. Under no circumstances should such novels be given to our schoolboys or teenage girls.
10. It would be a great act of charity if he and all of his fantastic and uncouth novels were expunged from our literature by means of serious, clear-headed criticism.

"Fifty-some novels by this so-called novelist are strewn before you on this table. They are the best manifestation of this writer's ignorance, of the ignorance of his readers, and of the silence of our critics who allow such a novelist to exist among the people."

When the secretary finished reading the indictment, the crowd began to cast glances back and forth. The presiding judge then turned to the accused and asked him if he considered himself guilty according to the terms of the indictment. To this Shomer responded:

"Your Honor, the entire indictment is a lie from A to Z, a total fabrication. It is the product of one of my enemies who is undoubtedly jealous of my talent, my achievements in Yiddish, and my books, which the public laps up like hot noodles. I am telling you the plain truth. Your Honor, this is all about envy. I tell you in all sincerity, it is entirely about jealousy!"

The presiding judge winked at the prosecutor, who rose and turned to the court with the following indictment:

"Honored judges and jurors! Before us sits an accused who is neither a thief, nor a bandit, nor a scoundrel. He did not commit any crimes. He did not insult anyone, cheat anyone, or reduce anyone to poverty. Yet now he is on the stand as a true offender, as a defendant. So what is this all about? What is the matter with him? In my opinion, your honors, he is guilier than a thief, a bandit, or a killer. True, this rascal did not set off to kill with a sword, a spear, or a club. He trampled on our innocent Yiddish literature with nothing more than a pen in his hand. Slowly but surely he murdered it.
He corrupted the taste of the public. He harmed our simple readers, poor things, who are not expert enough to know the difference between good and bad literature, who lose themselves in the dark without a critic to guide them, and who cannot yet differentiate between the value of works by Abrahamovitch and the garbage peddled by our accused Shomer. Fooling someone, stealing his money, and killing him are, in my opinion, lesser crimes than tricking an entire people, murdering an entire literature, and ruining the literary taste of thousands of readers. Because in the first case, only a single individual is harmed. But this is about the suffering of the public, of the masses, of a whole society.

"Consider what this fabricator of novels brought to our community. Shomer corrupted the feelings and taste of our ordinary readers to such a degree that our working men, housewives, and young women are so taken with his empty, wild, nutty novels that their minds are pulsating with his crazy fantasies. They will no longer even pick up a decent book, an ethical tract, a work with some moral direction. All they want are the kind of entanglements and intrigues, the moving and heart-stirring scenes found in Shomer's "most interesting novels," in which people steal, loot in broad daylight, dig up bodies from the grave, fight, battle to the death over a beautiful brunette or over a fine blond fellow, and other such wild fantasies imported from various vapid Russian, German, or French novels by Xavier de Montépin. Paul de Kock..."

"Your Honor!" the accused interjected, jumping up from the bench, "Your Honor! It is a lie! All lies! My enemies have trumped up the charges because of their great jealousy, their envy of me..."

"Mr. Accused!" the chief judge interrupted, "you must not forget that in a court-room one must sit with respect. If you are not being questioned, you must remain silent and seated!"

The prosecutor continued without even casting a glance at Shomer.

"Paul de Kock, Dumas, Ponson du Terrail, and others like them... our accused steals material from these worthless writers for his clumsy novels.

25 Xavier de Montépin (1824–1902) authored more than twenty popular French serial novels and feuilletons; collaborated with Alexandre Dumas on Tour de Saint-Jacques; his novel Simony Maria appeared in translation in Ladino in 1889.

26 Charles Paul de Kock (1793–1871), writer of French popular novels, many dealing with middle- to lower-class Parisian life.

27 Alexandre Dumas (1802–70), one of the most important nineteenth-century French novelists. Among his famous works are The Count of Monte Cristo, The Three Musketeers, and The Man in the Iron Mask.

28 Pierre Alexis, vicomte Ponson du Terrail (1829–71), a popular author of serialized fiction who began publishing in the French press in the 1850s. His nine books in the Rocambole series marked the transition between the Gothic novel and the rise of the French mystery and adventure novel.
He serves up these wretched works to the reading public who swallows them without any discretion. The people ingest this rotten food and do harm to their innards for years to come.

"I trust, honored jurors, that you are aware of the sacred purpose of literature. As every reader knows, fine literature—for instance, a decent novel drawn from real life—employs various shades to portray the positive and negative qualities of a character with the purpose of providing the reader some intimacy with man's spiritual nature. Since this kind of writing can sometimes be boring, like an ethical tract that tires the reader, writers created sublime poetry, they invented the novel, they made things up, a kind of theater in which the writer introduces his artificial heroes who speak, travel about, walk, sit, laugh, sing, cry, and so on. In order to keep the attention and interest of the reader, the writer's imagination fabricates different tales, coincidences, stories (and sometimes even very complicated ones), miracles and wonders, moving scenes that are either happy or sad and over which we pour out our tears.

"But when do the writer and his work realize their purpose? When he provides us with scenes that are recognizable to us, to which we have a connection, and that can more or less occur in real life. But when, for example, a writer tells us a story about a poker that fell in love with a shovel that then upset the jealous feather-duster so that the latter roused all the geese and turkeys... I ask you, what benefit, what moral value, what lesson does such a tale provide? Whose heart will it touch? Who will understand it? Who will draw pleasure from it, and to whom will it cause pain? Our novelist Shomer indulges in fantasy to such a degree that in his universe an ordinary teacher, a melamed, becomes a lord; a chimney-sweep becomes a count; death becomes life and life becomes death. In his works, millions in diamonds lie around like garbage. Servants boys and girls play out love affairs (or, as Shomer prefers, their "flirtations") over which they drown themselves, shoot themselves, hang themselves, and so on. In the same way that we have become accustomed to the cheerfulness of French novels, so too if you were to read one of Shomer's novels would you think that Berdiehev had been carried over to Paris, and that Chaim, Yosl, and Avram are strangers to worldly affairs. They have never heard of business, a rouble, a broker, a nobleman, or rates of interest; they just wander about in search of "love." Never in their lives have Hannah, Mira, and Brayndl been made aware that in this world there are such things as a store, a shop, a tavern, Yiddish translations of the Bible—no! Hannah, Mira and Brayndl recline on soft velvet divans, with little white dogs in their arms, singing sweet, sentimental songs about "love"... But people are always fond of hearing a tall tale, and when there is no fish people will eat potatoes, and when there is nothing better they will chew on straw... That explains why the common people chew straw. That explains why ordinary Jews and simple Jewesses pick up a novel by Shomer. On the Sabbath
day after the tsholent, when one can cast aside momentarily the burden of worrying about a living, when it is possible to forget that there are such things as a shop or a store to run, a broker to whom one owes money, or a nobleman and his little lady to whom one owes homage...at that moment women, teenage boys and young girls gather round to hear one of Shomer's wild, bizarre, awkward stories about the miracles and wonders of the melamed who is now a lord, the chimney-sweep who has become a count, the love between Yankl the blond student and Rokhl the brunette with cheeks as red as roses, and the pretty songs they sing and the passionate tears they pour out under the pale light of the moon. They experience the sighs and the moans of the unhappy lovers whose hearts are united but who suffer at the hands of their murderous parents who want to separate them, make their lives miserable, and drive them from this world.

The accused cried out again: "This is hearsay, your Honor! Pure jealousy and hatred!"

The presiding judge requested that he sit down and conduct himself with respect, and the prosecutor continued with his indictment.

"Love, honored jurors, love is an old story in literature, an ancient song! Every writer and reader understands that the best material for a novel is love, especially love among youth. It is a sacred feeling, a tender feeling, a gift from God, and without Him, without this sacred, tender feeling, we human beings would not be any better than animals. But there are many different modes and varieties of love. For instance, the love of parents for a child, and vice versa, of a child for his parents; love between brothers, sisters, and friends; love between best friends; love for all of humanity, for nature, for enlightenment, for things that are known to be good or bad. However, the love between a young man and a young woman is known to be the type of love that novelists from around the world take up. Thousands upon thousands of books have already been written about this type of love. A boy and a girl, a young man and a young woman—these are the fundamental elements in almost every novel. The young man is in love with the young woman. She is in love with him. They are in love with each other. Their hearts are united. Their souls are close. But they are torn apart, they are physically separated. Still, they seek the means through which they can quickly and easily realize their only goal in life, their only wish—to be reunited, to come together in the strongest of eternal bonds. The disputes, the struggles, the fights, the sufferings and the pleasures of this battle in pursuit of their ideal become the canvas upon which the writer designs the scenes of his novel. Just as no two places are alike, the same is true of love. Love comes into contact with all kinds of obstacles, occurs for different reasons.

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29. Traditional tsholent stew, prepared prior to the Sabbath and slowly simmered, eaten by Ashkenazie Jews on the Sabbath day after synagogue.
unfolds in miserable or happy circumstances. Here the parents are for it and there they are against it; here the groom is liked and the bride is not liked; here they encounter a plague of an uncle, a relative, a gossipy neighbor, and the whole story is turned around. Usually they cannot achieve their ultimate goal. They become full of anger and fury, tears begin to flow, disasters unfold, God help us. The groom hangs himself, the bride drowns herself, howling and grief, confusion ensues...Or, just the opposite. Everything is overcome, thank God. The bride and groom marry—Mazel tov! Congratulations!—This is how many writers conclude their novels.

"One has to be naive, like a young child, to believe that the plot of a novel is its most essential element, that the only thing that matters is whether the guy gets the girl. I told you earlier, honored jurors, that the entire purpose of literature is to illustrate the positive and negative aspects of human nature. Aside from providing us with pleasure through the plausibility of their descriptions, works by real writers and by educated novelists also provide a lesson—to each reader according to his comprehension and his abilities. In this way they ennoble our emotions, answer some of our fundamental questions regarding life, show us how it can be lived well or badly, and develop for us the finest feelings of mercy, sympathy, and humanity, and so on.

"This is relevant when speaking about the educated writer, the upstanding novelist. But we do not experience this in the works of our own accused, Mr. Shomer. There, on the table before you, in the novel *Der blutiger adieu*[^30] (The Bloody Adieu) this so-called novelist takes the liberty to state the following: "In writing my novel, I did not aim for you to derive a pretty lesson from my words, as other novelists do. No, I swear on my beard and sidelocks[^31] (What do you make of such a witticism!) that I did not intend anything of the sort...I wrote the novel with the sole purpose of entertaining you."

"We shall soon examine the type of entertainment provided to us by Shomer's pretty, wonderful stories. But at this point I am still focused on the ethical aspect of our so-called novelist who has the audacity to express himself openly with the decorative phrase "on my beard and sidelocks," admitting that he has no moral objective; his sole goal is to entertain.

[^30]: *Der blutiger adieu*, oder gift in glikkeboeker: eyn vunderlikhe rirenderroman, velker verdet dem lezer fil jergenigen jershitjen (The Bloody Adieu, or Poison in the Goblet of Happiness), Vilna 1879, 1883.

[^31]: A reference to the beard and sidelocks (peyes or peyot) worn by traditional Jewish men in observance of the biblical commandment (Lev 19:27): "Do not round off the hair on the corners of your head." In English, the translation should more appropriately read: "I swear on all that is holy." I decided on a literal translation because Sholem Aleichem takes offense at Shomer's expression.
"Elsewhere, such as in the novel *Dos antikl, oder di koshere meitsie* (The Precious Find, or A Heck of a Bargain)*52 Shomer expresses himself in the pretty language of a court servant: "Dear readers, purchase this exquisite merchandise. You will derive great pleasure from it, and it will teach you a great deal regarding how much you owe your family..."

"This preface made me quite happy, and in order to discover how it teaches "a great deal regarding how much we owe our family," I read the book from cover to cover. And what did I discover? Listen up!

"A young man, Izak Windman,*13 witnesses the beautiful actress, Zinaida, on the theater stage. A wild desire overcomes him. He makes her acquaintance and falls in love immediately, just like the rest of Shomer's heroes whenever they see a woman. He gets rid of his wife and spends night and day with this singer Zinaida. He buys her presents, brings her bouquets, sings her songs, and kisses her red lips until his wealth is reduced by some two thousand rubles. Who is this Zinaida, what is this Zinaida? A Jew or a Christian? Who is Izak? What was he before, and what is he now? We never know: the author does not want to disclose matters. All he tells us is that she made Izak buy her a bracelet for her birthday—something exquisite, engraved with two letters: S W—for which the jeweler Marcus at first wanted five thousand rubles, but which our hero Izak, who was a good bargainer, managed to haggle down to two thousand rubles. The bargaining itself occupies such a good chunk of the novel that it makes you sick to the stomach...In the end, when Izak obtains the most sparkling of the best diamonds*54 (to quote the author verbatim), and wants to run to his beloved Zinaida to buy her a diamond, suddenly (this is the manner in which every idea occurs in Shomer), suddenly another thought occurs to him: he has a wife who is twenty times more beautiful than Zinaida, and if she put on rouge and powder—says Shomer—just like Zinaida put on rouge and powder, she would be a hundred times more beautiful. As for my money? Let her suffer as much as she wants. I am not going to give her a dime! All of a sudden our fine Izak becomes a penitent. Since God helps penitents, the following miracle occurs to him: the two letters on the bracelet with the sparkling diamonds, Z and W, correspond precisely to his wife's initials, "Zelda Windman!"

"There is no end to God's wonders! As he approached his wife Zelda, she was in the middle of singing a pretty song by "that" Jewish poet:

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52 *Dos antikl oder di koshere meitsie: a moderner roman*, Vilna 1888.
53 Windman: windbag.
54 The original ("di huritanen fun der yere dimanten") is purposely satiric due to its circular location and its mistaken spelling. I render it below, for the sake of clarity, as "sparkling diamonds."
I don’t know the identity of the poet who composed this special song. Perhaps “that” poet is Shomer himself, because almost all of his novels begin with a poem in our holy language, Hebrew. But our hero Izak is so moved that he raises himself around his wife’s neck and with tears in his eyes, he gives Zelda the precious find, the bracelet with the sparkling diamonds.

“But the greatest miracle of all consists of the fact that the precious find, the bracelet with the sparkling diamonds for which Izak paid two thousand rubles, was in truth worth five thousand rubles! So our hero earned three thousand rubles off the entire deal! You can conclude from this that God should only be so kind as to bless all Jews and all young people in love with such bargains...

“This is the moral provided by this fabricator of novels. Such a novel is read by the common people, by ordinary folks, by simple readers who have no ability to read between the lines. Shomer calls this vile product a novel, and a novel with a moral to boot! I ask you, honored jurors, is this not a desecration? Is it not heartbreaking that for the sake of the two golden Shomer will earn from this work, an entire literature, a young literature, will be corrupted? In my opinion, our accused deserves the strongest punishment, the harshest penalty for this “precious find.”

“But let us continue. Here is another of Shomer’s novels, entitled Gvuld, eu iz mayn bord [Help! Where’s My Beard]. On the front cover there is an illustration of a drunken Gentile lass wearing a top hat and a Russian holding a big pair of scissors. It turns out that the Gentile lass with the top-hat is not a lass at all but rather a Hasid, whose beard and side-curls have been shorn. In the novel, Shomer goes on to explain “that the pious Reb Todros who has a liking for pretty young women always took great pride in his beard, just as a fashionable modern woman prides herself on her wide behind (that’s how Shomer puts it), and his side-curls were like two mouse tails…”

“Our talented novelist considers this satire. Our people are raised on this nice satire to laugh at a Jew with a beard. If one can laugh at a Jewish beard, it is a sign that one is already educated, sophisticated, Westernized, as the saying goes.

"In retelling you the entire story of "the beard," which actually is an adaptation of a Russian vaudeville sketch by Solovyov\textsuperscript{56} entitled "Gospoda Sobachkiny"\textsuperscript{57} (The Sobachkins), no one can imagine that even when Shomer is serious and thinks that he is being earnest he is tolerable; but when he falls into satire and begins to crack jokes, when he tries to be funny like a young rascal who is a bit tipsy, then he is really insufferable. No matter how many times I tossed the book aside, no matter how much it repelled me, no matter how much it nauseated me, despite all my pain and suffering I still had to read it and all these other novels through to the end. It would take a weak person more than half a year to return to himself after the exquisite marvels of Shomer's novels. Nor would I wish on any friend of mine the punishment of reading fifty-some books by Shomer.

"One can better understand how Shomer interprets the meaning and purpose of satire from what he says in his small satirical work A sheyne reyne kapore\textsuperscript{58} (It Serves Him Right). "These days, satire is in vogue: for instance, mocking a good friend to his face, laughing at a beggar—in one word, laughter, people should let it all out." But at the same time that Shomer is being satiric, he requests that he should not be made fun of... Now that's satire!

"In order for you to have some concept of Shomer's satiric talents and jokes I will relate several of his witicisms from his novel about "The Beard." For example: "He is full, excuse the expression, with learning... "Ha, ha, ha, right in the kisser..." "Hanael's bris, Amen congratulations..." "Even old men like a young woman"... "Jews today, because of our many sins, only love young girls"... "He whose hand I did not wash (What is our Shomer thinking here?) should with His righteous hand preserve all Jewish beards from such a misfortune as befell poor Todres' beard, Amen to that!..."\textsuperscript{59}

"I do not believe that shopkeepers in the marketplace jabber among themselves in this way, let alone cobbler's apprentices. Such chatter can only be the product of a talinted humorist, a cheerful satirist like Shomer, who offers up these obscenities to the world so that it can laugh and be merry!

"I will have the honor more than once of returning to the unique satirical talents of our accused Shomer. But I cannot hold myself back and stay silent, having experienced with my very own eyes such a masterwork as Der tayt khapt dem melamed: a rare sheyne erseyung\textsuperscript{60} (Devil Kidnaps the Teacher: A Pleasant True Story) by Shomer.

\textsuperscript{56} Vsevolod Solovyov (1849–1903), a Russian historical novelist.
\textsuperscript{57} All Russian quotations appear in the Cyrillic alphabet in Sholem Aleichem's original.
\textsuperscript{58} A sheyne reyne kapore, Vilna 1886.
\textsuperscript{59} Sholem Aleichem here quotes these lines out of context to provide examples of what he considers Shomer's failed attempts at humor.
\textsuperscript{60} Tayt khapt dem melamed: a rare sheyne erseyung, Vilna 1886.
"Shomer" declares piously: "We must thank and praise God who gives our hand the strength to write, our eyes the power to observe, and our what's-it-called...to sit on."

"Do you understand, honored jurors? This is how an author, a novelist, who writes books for the people chooses to express himself? Understand me well. Shomer thanks and prai ses the One whose name he is not worthy of pronouncing for bestowing upon him a "what's-it-called" to sit on!!! Such a descentration of God's name, such blasphemy is not even permitted in a tavern among drunks and hooligans. The use of such ugly words deserves to be punished with great severity. In our Yiddish literature people read such jokes and obscenities and they are delighted. This great Shomer is not only a novelist, he is a joker, a prankster, a humorist, a type of Heine;¹¹ Börne,¹² and Shchedrin,¹³ pardon the comparison.

"Demon Kidnaps the Teacher," that pleasant little work, is full of such satiric pears. For example, in this novel the cantor prays like a cat, the women jabber through the heart of the Rosh Hashanah service, and the teacher Tsadok Zerakh butchers his German...As to the depth of Shomer's own knowledge of German we will return a bit later...But do you understand the salt of the satire? The teacher Tsadok Zerakh wrote "chamapgnerie" instead of champagne, and instead of "you should send me some port wine" the teacher wrote "you should do to send me port whine," which is as realistic as the rest of Shomer's scenes.

Near the beginning of this satiric work, Shomer provides us with the following scene of pure comedy:

The door opened and Hannah Beyle entered.

"Good morning, Leybik! Have you already become a tailor?"

"Yes, auntie! Perhaps you would like me to sew you a shroud?"

"Go to hell! You have a special way of making fun of everyone."

"Who's making fun? He who laughs first is punished first. How old are you? Sixty? What about our matriarch Sarah who celebrated the circumcision of her son at the age of ninety?"

"Go to hell!"

"Auntie, you are angry...Treat me to a slice of bread and a sour pickle."

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¹¹ Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), one of the most important German Romantic poets, known for his acid satire. Heine converted to Lutheranism in 1825. His Jewish background prompted him to take up Jewish themes in several important works, including: An Halaios (about Catholic persecution of Jews and Muslims in medieval Grenada), Der Rabbi von Bacherach, Hebräische Melodien; and Joel ben Halévy.

¹² Ludwig Börne (Juda Löb Baruch, 1786-1837), German-Jewish humorist and political commentator who converted to Christianity and lived in exile in Paris.

¹³ M.E. Saltykov-Shchedrin (1826-89), a leading Russian nineteenth-century satirist.
"Enough of your jokes..."

"Just like that? Perhaps your goat died or the cow gave birth? Congratulations!"

"Chatterbox, just shut up! Anyhow, all jokes aside..."

"This is what passes for witty dialogue in Shomer!

Later, we overhear the following conversation between Leybke the jokester, what a devil, and David, a rabbinic judge:

"Welcome! A visit from Reb Leyb!"

"Yes, rabbi, I came to ask you a question... I was sewing, you should pardon my expression, my pants. I was holding the needle in my mouth and I swallowed it suddenly. Now it is stuck in my stomach. I want to know, am I kosher or unkosher?"

"Such an animal as you is always unkosher."

"Very well put, rabbi, indeed. You understand why I like you so much... An ox like you is an expert in cows..."

"The rabbi tells Leybke that he is a cow, and Leybke replies that the rabbi is an ox... Where does a rabbi, a judge, a pious Jew speak in such a manner? In Shomer's novels, which our people read! Shomer calls this a joke. Shomer is a happy-go-lucky fellow. You can see the white of his teeth while he laughs, and he wants the reader to laugh along with him. But it is not funny, honored jurors. It is no laughing matter. It would be more appropriate to cry and to weep than to laugh! Cry because among Jews a rabbi is treated with more disrespect that any servant; any tailor can insult him. Weep because in a literature for the people like our Yiddish literature, one can find such simple lowlifes who call themselves "novelists," who corrupt any decent feeling within the general public, damage its taste, and destroy the language itself."

"So, shall I continue with the interesting contents of this so-called novel by Shomer? Shall I provide you with its juicy details, like how the teacher 'Isadok Zenidk flirted with the servant girl Tsipe-Krayne (all of Shomer's heroes flirt); how he pulled her to his chest, kissed her, and embraced her; how they spoke about going into the fields in the morning where there is a barn, this teacher and this servant girl... Do you follow?"

"No! It is no longer possible for me to speak calmly about Shomer's satire, humor and moral lessons! I am putting an end to the discussion and turning our attention now to the matter of his fantasy, to his serious, earnest, great, important writings, to his most interesting novels. Because those that we have mentioned thus far are only "pretty and happy stories, morallistic and satirical works, nice simple stories for the people..." And now we will consider his "most interesting novels in two parts" where the talent of our great novelist generously unfurls itself in all its greatness. It occurs to me that I do not see before me Shomer but rather the famous French pseudo-novelists Xavier de Montépin, Ponson di Terrail, Paul de
Kock, and others. The difference between them is that these fantasists used their own imaginations to invent their unbelievable heroes and wild stories, whereas Shomer, our fabricator of novels, picked it all up from them and transported their heroes from Paris to Nyesvizh, from Marseilles to Berdichev, and from Bordeaux to Eyshishok. Indeed, Shomer's heroes have as much connection to Jewish life as Marseilles has to Berdichev. Consequently, Shomer's most interesting novels stick to us in the same way that a piece of paper sticks to the wall. Let us select one of Shomer's best novels from the table: Der oremter milhuemer (The Poor Millionaire), a most interesting novel in two parts.

"Honored jurors, this most interesting novel is a reworking, a reformulation, an imitation, of the famous novel Mystères de Paris by the well-known French novelist Eugène Sue. Whether or not Eugène Sue's...

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11. Nyesvizh: Shomer's hometown, a Belorussian shtetl in the region between Vilna and Minsk.
15. Berdichev: The quintessential Jewish city of the Ukraine; Jews constituted the majority of its inhabitants in the late nineteenth century.
17. Der oremter milhuemer, eyn hekhist interesanter roman in tsvey teyshn, Warsaw 1884 or 1884.

It seems as if the prosecutor was unfamiliar with Alexandre Dumas' work The Count of Monte Cristo. Had he read it, he would have seen that The Poor Millionaire was a precise reworking of Dumas' work, with only the French names of the characters put into Yiddish. It is incredible that the stenographer, Mr. Sholem Aleichem, did not notice this! Or perhaps he was so grateful to the prosecutor for his defense of Yiddish that he did not want to interrupt his presentation. What does it matter to the reader what is an imitation of, as long as it is not original...

The Typesetter

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

Khatatt, avrit, pashuṭṭ, I transgressed, I offended, I sinned! I am guilty, guilty, guilty! I believe the typesetter—who has expertise in these matters—when he says that in The Poor Millionaire Shomer patched over the wrong side of The Count of Monte Cristo. Aahh! I would trade a sack of beets and all fifty of Shomer's most interesting novels to get a hold of The Count of Monte Cristo at this moment! But who is guilty, if not Shomer alone? Who is responsible for tracing and controlling his works? The author himself should be responsible for pointing out the source of his fine peels. For example, here before our eyes are three "historical" novels by Shomer:
novel is good or bad is not my concern at this time. A well-known Hebraist, Kalmen Shulman, loved the novel. He took it upon himself to translate it into our holy tongue, and it was a solid translation. Had Shomer done the same—translate Mystères de Paris into Yiddish—that would have been enough! But no, our accused does not just want to be a simple translator. That does not suit him. So what did he do? He "made" his own novel with Eugène Sue's heroes and gave it the title The Poor Millionaire. Whereas in Eugène Sue's works the lead character is Prince Rudolf, the same role here is played by the Jew Glazvald, a millionaire. Glazvald who? Glazvald what? It is none of our business. Just as Prince Rudolf travels around Paris incognito in search of his lost family, so does Glazvald wander about the city of Nyswizh in search of his lost family. As you well know, in the end Prince Rudolf finds his lost daughter Maria, and Mr. Glazvald finds his lost son Naftali the watchmaker. Just as there is a terrifying bandit, Jacques Ferrand, in Eugène Sue, so too in Shomer do we find the usurer Hertsnshteyn, the murderous thief Shpin, a viper by the name of Gilon from Paris, an Elizabeth, and many other heroes. Since there is a poor miserable family Morel in Eugène Sue's Paris, why shouldn't Shomer include the same poor miserable family of

(1) Der gonaktier yoyrech (The Would-Be Heir), a historical novel.
(2) Khosen damim (Bridegroom of Blood), a historical novel [ed. The phrase Khosen damim appears in Exodus 4:25-26; Zipporah, wife of Moses, uses these enigmatic words to refer to the circumcision of her son at a moment when Moses seems to be in grave danger.];
(3) Der falscher herzig (The Fake Duke), a historical story.

On all three books we find the printed statement: "written by Shomer" (not translated). I was astonished: Where does Shomer get off writing a historical novel? In order to create a historical novel one must know something about history, and in order to know history one must know a thing or two... So I was doubtful about their connection to history, since they were not, God forbid, revamped like the rest of Shomer's novels. In the end, I put aside these three "historical" novels, several other pearls by Shomer, and those fifty other devils who dance after Shomer and imitate his style—works that my good friends sent me—long may they live... Until the next time, God willing, soon and with happy hearts. Amen.

Sholem Aleichem

49. Kalmen Shulman (1819-99). Hebrew maskilic writer and translator. His abridged Hebrew translation of Mystères de Paris (1857-60) proved extremely popular and went through several editions. The translation introduced contemporary French fiction to Hebrew readers and helped to demonstrate that Hebrew could function as a modern literary language.

50. Jacques Ferrand, the evil notary of Mystères de Paris who betrays the novel's heroine, Fleur-de-Marie.

51. Hertsnshteyn: "heart of stone."

52. Shpin: "spider."
Tshepe and Leah in Nyesvich? Whereas Rudolf comes and rescues the family from its poverty, here Glazvaid comes and sits over Leah's bed. What's the difference?

"I repeat: had Shomer wanted to translate that confusing story in its entirety into Yiddish, he would have been able to preserve his good name. We would not have had any right to comment on it. We would have only spoken about Eugène Sue, not about our accused. But as soon as Shomer slapped a new name on the work and published it as if it were his own creation, then we are obliged to abandon Eugène Sue and discuss the merits of The Poor Millionaire, as a Jewish work, as a novel by Shomer."

"Unfortunately, there is not a single Jewish type, not a single Jewish scene, not a grain of Jewishness in the entire novel. The author conducts himself like a performer: he parades before us an entire series of mannequins, artificial characters who wander about, run, sit, speak. This one loves that one; that one is in love with this one. This one is an angel, something extraordinary, a benevolent man; that one is a rogue, a bandit, a killer. This one is wise; that one is an idiot. This one is a beautiful, loving woman with long blond hair; that one is ugly, disgusting, like death incarnate. Shomer orders this or that hero to fall on his knees and declare: "I love you, my angel!" So he falls on his knees and declares: "I love you, my angel!"

"No, this is not quite a novel. It is more like an organ belonging to a street performer. Shomer cranks the handle and out comes: "Love!" Everyone is in love in his world, and they all love in the same way. Elizabeth falls unconscious, the seamstress swoons... everyone is constantly fainting and they are all equally deceived by their love, they are all equally despondent, they are all equally trusting. The heroes are so alike that if it were not for their different names we would not be able to perceive any differences between the wealthy Elizabeth and the poor Leah; between the millionaire Glazvaid and the watch-maker Naftali; between Hertsnhsteyn the usurer and Shpin-Nekht-Fayerfan the bandits. According to Shomer, a bandit is someone who kills people, robs people in broad daylight, disinters bodies from their graves, or disguises himself with various aliases. That's how it is with Shpin the bandit, Nekht the shady businessman, and Fayerfan the seamstress's husband. Wherever he goes, he finds a rich bride with a substantial dowry and piles of money. According to Shomer, money is as common as garbage—millions pile up in every corner!

"In Shomer's universe, an evil character must be a bandit. He does not understand that a bad character can be a good Jew, a respected household, not someone hiding behind three different names. He does not understand that someone can be evil even if he does not poison, kill, rob in the dark of night, drag bodies from the grave—things that do not even occur among Jews! I cannot imagine that there are still readers among us who are such fools that they would accept this as it is and continue to have faith in this writer."
"As soon as a novel does not relate to real life, it is no longer a novel but rather a Bove-nayye, a tall-tale, a story about a prince and a princess, a rabbi and his wife, about twelve brothers and twelve castles, about an Old English sheep-hound and a werewolf; and so on.

"Shomer's novels would not be such a great disaster were they just empty and useless to our readers, like his tale about the sheep-dog and the werewolf. But as I demonstrated earlier and I will point out to you, God willing, in a few moments, apart from these shortcomings they also are harmful from a moral perspective.

"As long as we are on the subject of fantasy, let us continue and open another of Shomer's 'most interesting' novels, Di agune"53 (The Abandoned Wife). I was delighted by its introduction, in which Shomer writes: "I can tell you with complete confidence that all of my characters are taken from real life..." It gave me tremendous pleasure to learn that Shomer at least recognizes that characters in a novel must have a connection to real life. But a man is his own worst enemy, and Shomer's tongue does him in. In the same prologue he later says with self-praise: "I know that if you read this novel you will applaud just as thunderously as you did in response to my earlier novels (2). And whoever does not enjoy my novel is not going to ruin things for me by reporting me to the religious authorities in an attempt to prevent me from being showered with synagogue honors..."

"After reading this comment about "thunderous applause" and "showered with synagogue honors," I immediately lost my trust and any regard for this "most interesting" novel in two parts.

"Let us consider what kinds of real-life characters Shomer crafts for us here. He wants to persuade us that such rogues exist in Lithuania among the Jews (I.e. swears this in The Abandoned Wife). But promises do not matter, and no one is obliged to believe Shomer. So I began to search the entire novel for a single living person who is not just some mannequin, but a familiar type, for one true scene of Jewish life. But what did I find? Another angel; another ideal-type; a saint, poor thing, who pays for other people's sins; another thief, bandit, and rogue (you only find rogues in Shomer); a barbarian who stabs, plunders, takes in money, lives it up, and who is unexpectedly defeated in the end to the pleasure of the author and the reader, who know that all evil characters in Shomer come to a bad end and that the righteous will recover, with God's help, in good time—Amen... That is how it is in Shomer's The Abandoned Wife, Di khalitse54 (The Levirate Marriage). Di

54. Di khalitse: eyn interesanter roman, Vilna 1883, 1884. "Hilzeh (1ch19ew) refers to the ceremony associated with biblical laws of levirate marriage in which a brother who normally would be obliged to marry his sister-in-law after his brother's death is released from his duties, allowing the woman to remarry according to her desires."
yerushe\textsuperscript{55} (The Inheritance), \textit{Der tiranisher bruder}\textsuperscript{56} (The Tyrannical Brother), \textit{Der baal ishutuv}\textsuperscript{57} (The Penitent), \textit{Der orenner milyoner} (The Poor Millionaire), \textit{Der raykhser better}\textsuperscript{58} (The Rich Beggar), \textit{Der oytser}\textsuperscript{59} (The Treasure), \textit{Di hayntnudishe kale}\textsuperscript{60} (The Stylish Bride), and \textit{Di farkayfite kale}\textsuperscript{61} (The Sold-Off Bride). That is how it is with all the characters in \textit{Shomer}'s "most interesting" novels, which are all, in truth, one grand unending novel in which only the names and locales are switched around; here the villain is called Hertsnshteyn whereas there he is Feldboym; here he is Perets while there he is Velvl Vokhernik\textsuperscript{62} or Daniel Pintl—but they are all rogues, they are all thieves, brigands, greedy bloodsuckers, vampires, hypocrites. They are all involved in intrigues. They defraud everyone they come across. They have all been married several times and have buried several beautiful innocent demoiselles. They are pals with the underworld and consort with the Jewish gravediggers, who rob the graves of the dead (Have you ever heard of such a thing among Jews?). In a word, \textit{Shomer}'s heroes—those rogues—are not heroes, not real people, not even wild beasts; rather they are vipers, half fish and half men, werewolves, royal couriers, eight-legged horses, and other such strange, wild, terrifying creatures intended to frighten young children, adapted from fairy tales and \textit{A Thousand and One Nights}.

"That is how it is with all of his villains, and that is how it is with every one of his heroes—the angels, the righteous ones—each a variant of the same prototype, the same character with different names. They are all good, honest, decent, pure, handsome, refined, unblemished, brave, courageous young men, educated children, faithful and devoted to the end. They all write passionate letters with the same words. They all speak about holy love in the same style, in the same tone, as if coached by a book to recite by heart: "Oh! I love you, my angel!" "Oh, I love you, my darling!" \textit{Shomer} stands at the back and prompts his hero: "Say, 'Oh, I love you my angel,'" and the hero says, "Oh, I love you my angel!" But they are words without any soul, without any feeling. They seem automatic, as if spewed out from a machine.

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Di raykhser yerushe, oder a mayse on a sof}, Vilna 1886.
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Der tiranisher bruder oder der opeken}, Warsaw 1884.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Der baal ishutuv: roman}, Vilna 1880.
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Der raykhser better: a roman in tsvey teyn}, Vilna 1884(?) 1886.
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Der oytser oder der kaliter gazlen: roman in tsvey teyn}, Vilna 1884.
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Di hayntnudishe kale oder ver iz shuldlke: roman}, Warsaw 1881 or 1882, 1887.
\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Di farkayfite kale: roman}, Warsaw 1886.
\textsuperscript{62} Vokhernik: a usurer.
"Though Shomer's heroines conduct themselves differently, they all act in the same way too, according to the same program, according to the same instructions. They all cast their eyes upward, searching for their ideal floating in the distant heavens, and in every novel they sing sweet, sentimental songs, a variety of which I now present to you from different novels by Shomer.\footnote{One of the reasons Sholem Aleichem cites these songs is to showcase their lack of artistry and sophistication. For this reason I provide the original Yiddish along with my literal (non-rhyming) translations.}

"In the novel The Poor Millionaire Elizabeth sits at the piano and sings

\begin{verbatim}
Ikh vil shayn mire do nit lebn
Keyn zelik iz mir zis
Ikh vil tsayn ibn sveybn
Shine in paradiz!
\end{verbatim}

I no longer want to live here
Nothing is sweet to me
I want to soar to my love
There in paradise!

"In the same novel, Leah the seamstress sits and sings in the same vein:

\begin{verbatim}
Dort im himl tsayn di shtern
Shpyatsir mayn engel lustik fray
Er zet shayn nit mayne tvoyn
Er iz mir shayn tugetray!
\end{verbatim}

There in the heavens, among the stars
My angel strolls happily and free
He no longer sees my tears
He is no longer faithful to me!

"In The Penitent Dina goes so far as to sing in "pure" German.\footnote{German readers will discover several mistakes in the German cited below. Sholem Aleichem sought out such examples as part of his struggle against daytshmerish (Germanisms) in literary Yiddish. See note 105.}

\begin{verbatim}
Ich steh am einsamen Hugel
Und schane noch dir zurueck
Es schenke die senkende Sonne
Dir eben den letzten Glueck.
\end{verbatim}

"In The Treasurer Icke sings the following:

\begin{verbatim}
In der stillen Abendstunde
Wenn der blasser Mond straht herab, usw.
\end{verbatim}

"in The Tyrannical Brother the hero Perets begins to write poetry to his bride (do you understand the meaning of "writing poetry"):

\begin{verbatim}
In der stiller Abendstunde
Wenn der blasser Mond straht herab, usw.
\end{verbatim}
Di shone Sonne mit ire shirah
Darfu tsi dayn fik shayn
Zey darfu zifshn shrayen (Vet?) oy vey!
Deyn du bist fit shiner fun zayn... (Fun vemen?)

The beautiful sun and its rays
Ought to fall at your feet
They (whom does he mean?) should sigh and cry: Woe is me!
Because you are more beautiful than they (than who?)...

"In The Rich Beggar" Helena Flantsberg sings:

Er iz eyn angel fun got geshikt
Dos werde ibb zogn bit mayn toyt
Mayn fershimadikes horts hot er dorfrift
Gereef hot er milkh fun mayn noyt.

He is my angel sent by God
I will say this to the day I die
He revived my faint heart
He rescued me from my dire condition.

"In Der kosherer yid" (The Pious Jew) Lize's servant-girl sings:

Mayn liber iz vayt fun danew
Ibb bi gebilin aleyn,
Me maydekh habn manen
Nor ibb, neshkh, zils un veyn.

My love is far away
I remain behind alone,
Other girls have fiances
But I, poor thing, sit and cry...

"In Der khveyren" (The Excommunication) Rivke sits under a tree and sings:

Mayn brast iz mit leydn voll
Du muss libender verlassen mitsh
Vielheit iz haynt das letste mol
Vos ibb ze mayn lebn dlekh...

My heart is full of suffering
You, my love, must leave me
Perhaps today is the last time
That I ever see you, my darling.

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65. Der kosherer yid, oder tsvey kets in eyn zek, date of first publication unknown. There was a reprint published in Vilna in 1891.

66. A later edition of this novel was published in Warsaw in 1897. I have not been able to locate the edition to which Sholem Aleichem is referring.
"In *Tsvishn tsvey flamen* (Between Two Flames)*67* Perele sings the following:

Af mayne lifn fil ikh zayn kus
Ikh her zayn zson kol
Dos iz geyen vi tsuker-zis
Akh! Yu ney ikh lm nokh a mol!

I feel his kiss on my lips
I hear his sweet voice
It was as sweet as sugar
Oh! Where can I find him again! ...

"In *Di blinde yesoyne*68 (The Blind Orphan Girl) Lisette sings to Itsik melancholically:

Oder in libe shlokt dayn shnerz
Zi hot akh tiranish antzogt
Iz dos il urzakh fyn dayn shnerz
Bist darun farveynt, ferklogt...

Or perhaps your sorrow comes from love
She rejected you tyrannically
And that is the source of your suffering
That is why you cry and mourn...

"Honored jurors, from these cultured pearls you understand that our accused *Shomer* is not only a great novelist, moralist, and satirist but also a wonderful poet for old maids, for grown-up brides, for foolish boys—perhaps even a prominent poet. One cannot say that he is a poet like Goldfaden. He is more like Moyshe Marakhovski from Boslov69 who modeled himself on Goldfaden’s style and reworked Goldfaden’s songs from “Yudele”70 so artfully that it enlivens the soul:

Mayn vayb vigt nikh in vigt
For deon shtild vigt...
Zi shrayt gevild
Ikh zoi ir geben bald...

My wife is rocking me in the cradle
For a piece of kugel...
She cries out, ‘Help!’
So that I will give her some soon..."

(Contemporary Poems by Moyshe Marakhovski from Boslov)

68. *Di blinde yesoyne oder tsvisn itgen; eyn roman*, Vilna 1880.
69. Boslov (or Boguslav), town south of Kiev in the Ukraine. See note 11 for more on Marakhovski.
70. *Dos yudele* (The Little Jew, 1866), anthology of Yiddish poetry and songs edited by Goldfaden.
"Mr. Prosecutor!," the Chief Justice cried out, "I ask you to stay on point. You began by discussing Shomer's novel *The Abandoned Wife* and you have digressed to Moyshe Marakhovski's poetry...."

"Yes, jurors, in all honesty the poetic talents of our accused so mesmerized me, so enchanted me that I forget entirely about Shomer's *The Abandoned Wife*...."

"Our talented novelist, who had already written many novels in his lifetime, achieved something new in *The Abandoned Wife* in order to interest the public. Shomer's innovation was: Scandal. This is nothing new in other literatures. For example, the Parisian penny novels that are published almost daily in impressive quantities are lapped up like hot noodles because the French audience loves a good scandal. But among Jews, in Yiddish literature, this an important innovation, and this innovation is due to Shomer alone.

"Consider the following pretty story:

*Ish hoyo be-kitnevis*, there was a Jew in Kitnevits, and his name was Benjamin. He was nothing more than a dealer in wagons, a pauper, God save us. But suddenly—that's how it always is with Shomer, all of a sudden, miracles and wonders around every corner!—suddenly this Benjamin the pauper becomes enormously wealthy off real estate and precious metals. This Benjamin had a son, Aaron Feldboym. Aaron Feldboym, as is usually the case, was a knave, a thief, a scoundrel—in a word, a complete rogue! He made many women miserable...His first victim was a married woman, Hannah-Rachel, who was left an agune, an abandoned wife, because of him. Aaron Feldboym also burned her father's house to the ground. This same Aaron Feldboym also robbed a church (can you believe these terrible deeds?). A little later, this rich bandit married, but he quickly did away with his unfortunate wife, and then he...What do you think? Poisoned her? Slaughtered her? Burned her? God forbid! He just threw a loaf of bread at her head and she went out of her mind...you get it? Such tragedies can occur only in Shomer. Aaron Feldboym went on to have three more wives.

"Do you think that was the end of it? Absolutely not! Aaron Feldboym cast his eye upon the beautiful Malka. But this Malka loved Hannah-Rachel's son, Avrom. The progress of this wonderful relationship is worth considering. Avrom taught Malka all about "love." He engaged her in long conversations, in philosophical discussions, and concluded with the statement from the holy Torah "Thou shalt not cover another man's wife." But just to have a good time with her, without "meaning any harm"...Shomer persuades us that this is permissible. If it is a question of a woman who does not even have a husband, it is 100% kosher! The long and the short of it is that Malka ended up turning her eyes to the heavens:

...isvishn di shern
Shipatsirt tr engel lustik fray,
Er zet shoyn mer uit tre tren
Er iz tr shoyn ungetray
...among the stars
Her angel strolls happily and free,
He no longer sees her tears
He is no longer faithful to her!

"Now let us leave these two lovebirds behind, leave Malke and her "angel," and return to the villain Aaron Feldboym. This little devil, you may recall, had already cast his eye on his next victim, Reb Hershl's beautiful daughter Yente, whom the bastard quickly trapped in his net. Shomer relates how Yente began to visit Aaron secretly at night...one thing led to another, until she began to feel that she soon ought to...in a word, the accursed lout got her into trouble and even accused her of fooling around with David the musician... But you haven't heard anything yet! In Kintevits there was a barber-surgeon, Leybke, who was an expert at abortions. Aaron ordered a "potion" from him for Yente, from which she ultimately died...

"But since the powers that be have decided that Shomer's rogues must suffer their hell in this world, Aaron began to have terrifying nightmares with hallucinations. It did not occur to him to repent. Just the opposite: his roguish instincts burned even stronger, and he went off to war in Romania, where he managed to finagle millions by the shovelful, and made even more people miserable. Shomer brings the remaining characters in the novel to Bucharest, where the author shows us "the source whence all had gotten their money," and "the veritable paradise that was the café in the magnificent Grand Hotel..."

"Such details led me to believe that Shomer himself was probably in Bucharest at that time, together with his novels, and I might have hoped that the author would have provided us with true scenes and interesting stories of our brothers in Bucharest." At the time, there was a lot of material about Jewish life that might have been depicted from many different angles and illuminated from all possible sides. We could have anticipated this from a real writer, from a writer of the people like Spektor for example, who loves to observe Jewish life and faithfully depict its scenes and types, to the extent that his talent permits. But we could not demand such things from one who churns out novels like Shomer. Shomer is preoccupied with bandits and intrigues, with vipers and werewolves, so how could Mr. Khaykl or Spektor's Mr. Trayt[1] be of any value to him? Where Spektor would have

71. Sholem Aleichem is being coy here in that he knows that Shomer was in Bucharest as a contractor for the Russian army during the Russo-Turkish war (1876–77) and that these contractors (most of whom were Jews) were living large at a hotel similar to the one he describes. Sholem Aleichem may also be hinting at the early Yiddish theater, whose early productions took place in Bucharest.

72. M. Spektor, Reb Trayt: ersheyng in isrey yeyn (Warsaw 1889); another revised version of the novel was published in Der hoyz-shraynd (1895), 1–148. It is likely that Sholem Aleichem is referring to an excerpt from the novel that appeared prior to its publication in book form in 1889, though I have not been able to find the
taken the time to describe the coachman with his two horses. Shomer creates ten bandits, seven angels, five innocent souls, three disinterred bodies, a Jewish teacher engaged in an affair with a Gentile lass under the moonlight, a duel between Yakelzon and Khatskhzon, a vial of poison, a noose, impassioned letters, sugary songs, eyes beseeching the heavens, terrifying dreams, buckets of tears, and a lot of blood... Where Spektor would have said a few sincere, heartfelt words to take pity on the people—the suffering and poverty of the Jewish masses that includes millions of "paupers and beggars" and a few wealthy ones... in place of Spektor's touching words that come from the heart and affect the reader deeply, Shomer would have churned out countless puffed-up, empty ringing phrases sweetened by his own philosophical insights.

"In the second part of The Abandoned Wife, Shomer states: "Were we to consider the world and all creation with an open critical mind, we would see that life is always bound to death, and that luck is always connected to misfortune... Of that, we do not need to adduce any particular proof; it is already a well-known fact. That is why the old sages* said: It is a wheel of fortune, where one wins, and then another... We see the same in the Crimean war..."

What a parable!

"Once upon a time there were two brothers, one was wise, studious, learned in Torah, and the other was called Benjamin and had a yellow beard—and that's the way it is..."

"I am so accustomed to Shomer's "philosophy" that I almost know it by heart. Almost every one of his chapters begins with an elevated philosophical statement in which the author gets so excited that he speaks with the echoing authority of a barrel-maker. It is not for nothing that Shomer writes the following in The Levirate Marriage:

"I have already entangled myself enough in these tangential subjects. Readers would surely hold it against me if I were to drive them crazy with my somber philosophizing. Poor things, they pay good money for the story itself. So I have to make them happy and return to the story..."

"But Shomer does not do what the reader wants. On almost every page he offers up—as he calls it—his "somber" philosophizing, and he often says

source. The wordplay with the names Khaykl and Traytl also may be a nod to two works by Isaac Meir Dik: "Reb Traytl der kleynshetisher noged," Varshover yadisher saytung (1867-68); Khaytsikl allen: a sheyno un ware gestilkh, vi azoy eibert zoln zoeyre kinder erisien (Vilna, 1887).

75 M. Spektor, Antifun ve'uyojim, oder shtetliche un ungleichliche (Petersburg, 1885).

* Which old sages? Where is this written?—it is a total fabrication.

The Typesetter
these things with such conviction, with such open insolence, that one wants to burst with frustration. "Practice teaches us that...poor parents love their children with greater warmth and tenderness than the rich..." (The Abandoned Wife)

"I will not explicate every one of Shomer's philosophical thoughts, but rather provide you with a full page of his words of wisdom that are based on history, astronomy, psychology, anthropology, phrenology, and so on. That which Shomer refers to as his "sombre philosophizing" was called "krantsefolye" or foldered by a big ignoramus who is an acquaintance of mine." 71

"Listen to some of his pearls of wisdom:

"Just as the honest man has no concept of how a robber comes to steal...so too does the thief not understand how the honest man can live peacefully and survive through business alone..." (The Blind Orphan Girl)

"When a person has a lot of worries and he does not know which one he should deal with first, at that moment he finds himself face to face with the greatest worry of all...And as the second worry passes, the third and fourth worries come along, and so on, until he has been confronted with all his worries. At that instant it is possible for us to say that he stands before the final worry in the same state of despair as he stood before his very first worry..." (The Rich Beggar)

"Just as the sea has no bottom, so is Shomer's philosophy groundless. Even if I had the opportunity to speak to you for three days and three nights, I still could only provide you with a tenth of what our accused has written in his hundred-some novels. Nothing to sneeze at—a full hundred novels!!! There are thirty to forty characters in every one of Shomer's novels (there is never a shortage of characters with Shomer). That is to say, there is a total of some four thousand heroes, four thousand different characters with different souls, personalities, perceptions, thoughts, talents, inclinations, habits, qualities and deficiencies, all derived from nature and from their education. In short, it is not an easy task. One must have a special talent in order for each and every book to be carefully chiseled. It requires a lot of blood, sweat and tears, not to mention the fact that you also need that God-given gift called talent. Before the author publishes each book, he must first go through it carefully, think about it ten times over, improve it, correct it, freshen it up and rework it so that it reaches the level of a work of literature.

71. I elected to translate "krantsefolye" (crowning folly) as "foldered." In Sholem Aleichem's early novella Taybele (1884), the wealthy ignoramus Gershon Shpringer employed this word to refer dismissively to the Haskalah (the Jewish Enlightenment). Sholem Aleichem playfully explained to his readers in that novella: "We searched for the meaning of krantsefolye in all of the new and old dictionaries but we could not find such a word. Therefore we ask our readers to memorize the word krantsefolye so that it will remain for generations to come" (Al emek fun Sholem Alekhem, vol. 20 [Vilna and Warsaw: Klatskin, 1926], 35).
so that it is gleams and sparkles, so that it seems alive, so that its words speak both to the mind and to the heart.

Our accused Shomer does not understand his responsibilities in this way. He began to treat Yiddish—our literature for the people—as a game, as if churning out a new novel every day was some kind of business transaction through which he could become an entrepreneur, a supplier of novels to Yiddish publishers. The public looked upon this with indifference, and the critics took notice and remained silent: "Whatever... it is only for the people, for the masses, for common folk who are perfectly willing to chew on straw... What does it matter?!" This is how the masses are exploited. They hand over their money and are given grass in return, and nobody dares to say a word. "But you are talking about Shomer... Shomer! He has already written a hundred novels, and the public reads them, so there must be something to them!" When the well-known critic in Voskhod, Mr. Criticus, attempted to comment on and appraise the value of one little book by Shomer, the great novelist responded with an article of his own in the Yidishe folksblat in which Shomer proved that he is Shomer...

Honored jurors, I cannot be satisfied with the novels we have enumerated up to now, because they are all older works, sins of youth. Who knows,

* Shomer takes pride in the fact that he can finish a large novel in two nights.

** The Typesetter

75 Voskhod, Jewish periodical for the intelligentsia, published in Russian in St. Petersburg (1881–1906).

76 Criticus, pseudonym used by the historian Shimon Dubnov (1860–1941) in his critical writings about Yiddish literature.

77 Criticus's article, "Literaturnaia Etopias" (Literary Chronicles: The Poverty of Contemporary Jewish Belles-Lettres), Voskhod, May 1887, was a critique of both Shomer's Der raykheter beter and his Hebrew work Ha-aydahat. Excerpts (in Yiddish translation) from Criticus's article later appeared in Yidishe folksblat 27–28 (1887). Criticus anticipated many of the criticisms that Sholem Aleichem would incorporate into The Judgment of Shomer. For instance, he asserted that since Shomer's work lacked authenticity, both in terms of its description of Jewish life and in its portrayal of Jewish characters, "there is nothing one can really say about it artistically." He challenged Shomer: "Is Jewish life so impoverished that there is not enough material in it for true creativity?" He also called attention to the grammatical flaws in Shomer's Germanized Yiddish.

78 Yidishe folksblat, Yiddish weekly, published in Petersburg beginning in 1881 and edited by Alexander Tsederboym.

79 A reference to Shomer's article "A patsh fara patsh" (A blow for a blow), Yidishe folksblat 30 (1887), 483–88, in which Shomer responded to Criticus and other critics by commenting: "He must have written these words out of jealousy, hatred, or perhaps simply because he is a little out of his mind—it shouldn't happen to us."

80 The term Sholem Aleichem employs for sins of youth, Hate'ot Né'u'rin, was also
perhaps we will find a different Shomer in the later works? Frequently, talented writers retreat, whereas those who begin as invalids improve and make such great strides forward that it is difficult to recognize them. So now let us open one of his latest works, a novel with the fine title Pattele Ox, published in Vilna in 1887—it is fresh and right out of the hopper, something that enlivens the soul.

"In the preface to this fine novel, Shomer writes: "The many plaudits I receive every day from readers..." In simple Yiddish, he might as well just say: "Come on, buyers! Over here, buddy! It's good here! Get a deal here! It's fresh here! Neighbor, come on over!"

"...my novel contains everything that the Jewish audience demands: moving scenes, great intrigues, secret romances, surprise encounters..."

Buttons, sticks, raisins, whips,
Shirts, ties, cookies, material,
Bagels, pins, thread, and soup!...

"In a word, Shomer knows what the public demands. Shomer knows that the masses love razzle-dazzle and hocus-pocus, so he gives it to them. The audience loves scandals, so he gives them scandals, each more spectacular than the next. But we will return to this matter shortly. I want to get back to his "introduction":

"I once again ask my readers that when they pick up one of my works they check on the first page to ensure that my real name appears on the cover, because people have begun to exploit my name and slap it on various rags in order to confuse readers..."

"As they say in Russian: Osteregaties' poddelki!, or watch out for thieves! A poor lot has fallen upon our young Yiddish literature if indeed there are writers and publishers who aspire to imitate Shomer! We can console him with the words of a Russian poet:"

the title of the autobiography (1873–76) of the Hebrew writer, critic, and journalist Moshe Leib Lilienblum (1848–1910), in which he described the struggles of his youth, his sexual awakening, and the development of his beliefs. The reference would have been obvious to sophisticated readers.

81. Sholem Aleichem is mocking Shomer's self-promotion as something more appropriate for a street hawker shouting out his wares than for a writer.

82. A reference to I.M. Dmitriev. The first line cited by Sholem Aleichem is somewhat different in Dmitriev's version, and words are reordered for the sake of rhyme:

ЭПИГРАММА
«Я разорился от воров»
«Каплю о твоем я горю».
«Ужасна путь моих стихов!»
«Однако я об этом»
"Uri! Mentsa o bobrit!
Zhidelu o zumen la gory.
Pak nolch stihov ukral!
Zhadelu ta o vore..."

"which translates into Yiddish as:
"Alas! Robbers have fleeced me."
"I'm sorry, that's terrible."
"They've stolen a bunch of my poems!"
"Pity the thief..."

"Too bad for the thief, too bad for Yiddish, too bad for our people!
"How about this for a scandal: Benjamin Fridliss was the only son of Levi Fridliss, a wealthy man from the city of Bobruisk. When Benjamin turned nineteen, Shomer told him that it was time for him to fall in love. So he went off and fell in love with the beautiful Maria, the only daughter of the police inspector Samuel Bergetal (almost every hero in Shomer is an only son and almost every heroine is an only daughter). Benjamin began to pay frequent visits to the beautiful Maria. Her parents, who knew that Benjamin's family was well-off, took notice and helped matters along a little so that their "love would ignite." Indeed, their love was sparked, until shortly thereafter the beautiful Maria joyfully informed our fine Benjamin that, with God's help, he soon would be a father...

"Of course, this good news was not at all pleasant to our Benjamin. To fall in love, to fool around with a girl... that's one thing, why not? But to be a father at the age of nineteen, yuck! That is the way it is, explains Shomer in his somber philosophy, or folderol: "Love is the most sacred thing until one partakes of her fruits... But when the lovers allow themselves to enjoy her fruits..."

"You get it?

"Beys ho-hi, by the time Benjamin was enjoying the fruits of love, a teacher had already got there before him, and he was followed by a small-time accountant, a lout, a yeshiva student who ran away from his wife, a scholar, a recluse, a beggar, a good-for-nothing, a robber, a rogue, a butcher, a werewolf, a viper, a rascal from Shomer's cast of rascals—and his blessed name was Paltiel Ox.

"Our fine Benjamin revealed his secret to Paltiel Ox: he had already tasted the fruits of love and he had gotten himself into a nasty bit of business, God save us, such that soon he was going to be a father...

"Ha, ha, ha! You're such a child!" Paltiel Ox answered him. "What a joke on Samuel, his wife, and his daughter..."

"What type of advice have you got for me, Reb Paltiel?"

81 Bobruisk, large Belorussian shtetl.
"My advice is simple. Spit into his clean-shaven face! ...What do you have to worry about? For five rubles I can find you a guy who will swear that Maria is pregnant with his child..."

"You can do that?"--Benjamin asked, delighted.

"It's nothing!"--Paltiel responded.

"Oh! You are my savior, my best friend in the entire world!"--Benjamin cried, embracing Paltiel and kissing him through his tears.

"The next day Paltiel Ox came to Samuel the Inspector General and talked with him about his daughter Maria, who had for all intents and purposes got herself married without a ceremony...And he let it be known that Benjamin could not be of any assistance, except to help "wipe away the stain on the family honor"...

"Let your daughter go to Warsaw, and let her remain there quietly until she gives birth...That is the beginning of all wisdom. In addition, you will not be destroying a living creature because the child, poor thing, isn't guilty of anything..."

"Aren't you forgetting how much money one must have for all of this?..." Samuel answered dispassionately.

"You are entirely correct," Paltiel answered him. "I reckon that 500 rubles would cover things?"

"Not nearly enough," Samuel shot back. "My daughter is only in her fourth month...with today's expenses..."

"A thousand rubles will surely be enough?"

"Yes, a thousand rubles should cover things..."

"So, in the meantime, good night!..."

"Honored justices and jurors, what can one say about such a scene? What can one say about this denunciation of an entire people? A Jew wrote this, a Jewish author, a Jewish helletrist, one of our writers of the people, and he portrays for us how a Jewish parent first sells his only daughter into prostitution, and then assuages his wounds with a thousand rubles. There no longer remains any feeling among them except for money. What happened to the family life that had been the pride of Jews among all nations? There is no love, no loyalty, no compassion—nothing at all except for money, nothing except for a thousand rubles!...Only a Jew-baiter, a Judeophobe, only the Jews’ worst enemy could offer up such a scene! Such an incident has never even been heard of among Jews. Listen to how the immortal Turgenev writes about this in his story "Zhidi." It is worthwhile...

84. An ironic reference to the biblical verse "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom." (Ps 111:10) Also, Reishit haKumah (The Beginning of Wisdom) was a classical tract of Jewish mysticism, ethics, and morality written by the sixteenth-century scholar Rabbi Elijah de Vidas.

85. Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev (1818-84), one of the most important nineteenth-
to consider how a Christian portrays almost the same scene that *Shomer* offered up in his *Paltiel Ox*.

"Who among us does not remember Red Hirshl, the middleman?" Turgenev tells us that this Hirshl was nothing more than a spy who permitted the officer to look at his pretty daughter Sara, but just to look at her, nothing more, for a fistful of golden coins!

"When the officer ordered him to leave and his daughter to remain behind in the tent, Hirshl responded: "Oh, no, no. It is strictly forbidden, not permitted. I’ll stay outside, around the corner, it is forbidden!..."

"And this is how Hirshl the agent managed the officer for a while. He squeezed a small fortune out of him, promised him mounds of gold—and the officer could only look at the beautiful Sara, gaze into her big black eyes, admire her pretty shining face—and nothing more..."

"The great artist Turgenev showed us through the use of his talented pen how the worst and most corrupt father possesses a love for his child that is...

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century Russian realists; author of the classic novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862). Turgenev’s early story “Zhid” (Kike) first appeared in 1846.

86 Turgenev introduces the protagonist of his story as follows: “This Jew, whose name was Hirshl, was continually hanging about our camp, offering his services as an agent, getting us wine, provisions, and other such trifles. He was a thinish, red-haired little man, marked with smallpox; he blinked incessantly with his diminutive little eyes, which were reddish too; he had a long crooked nose, and was always coughing.” In Turgenev’s narrative, the Jew tempts the Russian officer with the promise of providing him with services, including tempting him with an attractive young woman. He carefully manages their interactions, ensuring that the officer’s desire for her intensifies (thereby increasing his reliance on the Jew) while not allowing for the sexual consummation of that desire. Only at the end of the story, when Hirshl is about to be hanged as a spy, is it revealed that the woman is his daughter Sara. Sholem Aleichem’s reading of Turgenev’s story is problematic in that he emphasizes Turgenev’s sensitivity to the primacy of the Jewish family and to the value of female modesty, while leaving out the fact that, in the end, Hirshl does offer to trade sex for clemency:

"Your honor," he began muttering, "look, your honor, look... she, this girl, see—you know—she’s my daughter."

"I know," I answered, and turned away again.

"Your honor," he shrieked, "I never went away from the tent! I wouldn’t for anything..."

He stopped, and closed his eyes for an instant... "I wanted your money, your honor, I must own... but not for anything..."

"But now, if you save me," the Jew articulated in a whisper. "I’ll command her... I... do you understand?... everything... I’ll go to every length..."

greater than any other emotion, even for such a greedy lowlife as Hirshl the spy who lost his life over a few coins (he was caught with a sketch of the Russian camp and he was hanged). Turgenev’s great genius allowed him to recognize that Jewish respect for family life was so great, and that the innocence of a Jewish daughter was so strongly protected, so sacred, that...

"Now let us compare: Turgenev’s story was written by a Russian author for the Russian people, whereas Shomer’s was written by a Jewish writer for the Jewish people! How can that be? Because Turgenev is a real writer, a genius, an artist, a poet, and on top of it a humanist with an aesthetic sensibility, with a sensitive spirit, with good taste. In short, he has all those important attributes with which God blesses only the chosen few from among His servants.

"This is true in Turgenev’s case, as well as in the case of other writers among other peoples, including the Jews, but not in the case of Shomer. By contrast, the decency and honor of a Jewish woman is masterfully portrayed by the Jewish poet Gordon. 87 Consider Gordon’s "The Tip of the Yud": 88 Admire the way the poem describes the piety, honesty, and innocence of the beautiful Bat-Shu’a who has never been fortunate enough to experience a single lucky day in her entire life. Her husband Hillel abandons her in his search to earn a living. Suddenly, in an instant, the bright sun shines down upon the unfortunate Bat-Shu’a and a passion ignites in her heart, a fire of love for the widower Fayvish, who notices her in the store and attracts her with tenderness, without any of the scandals or “tasting the fruits of love” that are a staple in Shomer’s works. Even when their entire blissful plan is destroyed over the tip of the letter yud—over a missing point on a letter in one of the names on the writ of divorce, thereby rendering it invalid—even then when the unfortunate Bat-Shu’a realizes that she will remain a grass widow, and a shopkeeper in Ayalon 89 exposed to suffering, poverty, and disaster—even then this Bat-Shu’a remains a daughter of Israel, a decent, innocent Jewish woman until the day of her death, until the grave! Gordon understands this, but not Shomer.

"To be a writer of the people one must be both talented and patriotic. One must be a humanist and a lover of one’s people, and whether in reproo

87. Judah Leib Gordon (1831–92), Hebrew poet, critic, journalists, social advocate, and outstanding exponent of the Jewish enlightenment. His poem “Habaham” (Awake, My People) was the motto of a generation of maskilim, while his “Le-mi ani’amol” (For Whom Do I Toil, 1871) despaired of the future of Hebrew culture. “Perhaps I am the last of Zion’s poets, and you the last readers.”

88. “Koiso shel yod” (The Tip of the Yud, 1876), famous poem by Gordon in which he champions the rights of women. The poem criticizes extremist exponents of tradition who would deny a woman happiness by leaving her “chained” to her husband based on a minute technicality in the writ of divorce.

89. Ayalon: an anagram, based on its Hebrew letters, for the city of Vilna
or in laughter, one must have faith in the people, one must be devoted to them and love them, just like Abramovitch whose heart, whether he is laughing or mocking, bleeds for them.

"When I write about my unfortunate people," confesses Abramovitch in a private letter to an acquaintance, "my heart bleeds for them. I laugh for the sake of appearances, but it is a bitter laugh mixed with bile, and a feverish form of writing in which I am consumed until I extinguish like a candle..."

"This may be how Abramovitch writes, but not Shomer. Shomer looks only for filthy scandals that he hopes will prompt his audience to break out in thunderous "Bravos"! If they don't, it does not bother him one way or the other whether he is showered with honors in the synagogue.

"The other great Yiddish writer Linetski, who toils, outdoes himself, and expends his rare satiric talent on entertaining little fragments that the public loves in order to earn himself some bread—this Linetski who laughs and contorts himself like a clown before his audience, at great pain to himself, bleeds for our poor Jewish people whenever he speaks, writes, or thinks of them. There is nothing sadder in the world than one who must bring himself to laugh when he really wants to cry, and who must climb walls while a fire rages in his heart, while his head is who knows where, and all along behind his back, the angel of death lies constantly in wait..."

"But this has to do with Linetski, not Shomer, who confesses in his novel The Penitent that "because I am so soft-headed, I do not remember how I got from here to there."

"I will take him at his word. One can also become soft-headed after experiencing some fifty so-called novels by Shomer, which I read with such trembling that to this day I still dream of werewolves, vipers, rogues, angels, old maids with their eyes turned to the heavens, their sentimental, cloying songs, Shomer's "somber philosophy," or "folderof"...

"Let us move from that most interesting novel Pallett Ox to an even finer one: A sheyne moyse nor a kurise" (A Story, Short but Sweet) written by Shomer in 1887.

"A few weeks ago," writes Shomer in the introduction, "I was in Warsaw, and I was staying in Hotel Danzig located at Nalewki 18. Since I come to Warsaw quite often, I am as familiar to the hotel employees as a plugged nickel, and I know them..."

"Thanks to the fact that Shomer knows all of the clerks at Warsaw's Nalewki 18, we now have the privilege of reading A Story, Short but Sweet. If Shomer were not notorious, God forbid, among the servants and clerks at Warsaw's Nalewki 18, then Yakub, the chief valet of Hotel Danzig, would not have been able to tell him the following fine tale, Shomer would not

90. A sheyne moyse nor a kurise, Vilna 1887.
have printed it, and we would not be privileged to read it... The story is truly short but sweet, though it should have been a bit shorter! Here it is:

"First, Yakub the valet recounts a merry tale about a couple from Lodz, who were staying in room 52, and a couple from Kovne, who were staying in room 62. The guest from Kovne had an old wife and the guest from Lodz had a young wife. The guest from Kovne, who left his room on some other matter... was led astray and visited the younger woman in 52. So, you understand... in short, punches, cries for help, tears...

"This is simply a merry little story, a satiric scene. The real stew follows.

"Yakub, our fine young hotel valet, arrived in the town of Mezerish after nightfall, and could not find a single soul. As if he did not already have enough problems, he fell down, could not get up, and cried out: “Help me!” Suddenly... suddenly a Jew appeared out of nowhere... You are probably thinking it was just some ordinary Jew? No, it was a Jew with a lantern! This Jew with the lantern rescued him. He saved his life! But Yakub the valet was destined to suffer, because the old man, whose name was Isaac Dreykop,91 and his wife mistakenly identified Yakub as their son-in-law Yankl, who had long ago cast away their daughter Shyne-Feygl...

"One way or another, they did not let Yakub the valet return to his wife and children! They watched his every step. He was given a separate room with Shyne-Feygl, the wife foisted upon him, and his new mother-in-law lavished him with gold92 (that’s what Shomer writes, literally). Her long-lost son-in-law now had to live “on proper footing” with her daughter. And he, Yakub the valet, was forced to remain there, without any residence permit to boot, until the real Yankl turned up. Only then was Yakub the valet able to return home to his little lady, to his wonderful guests at Hotel Danzig 18, where Shomer stays whenever he visits Warsaw.

"Of course, you probably think that this is the core of the novel? You are mistaken. It would have been better had the whole story ended with that. But this entire narrative about Yakub’s mistaken identity is only a canvas for Shomer, a prelude, an introduction. The real affair is just getting started!

"Since Yakub the valet remained with Shyne-Feygl alone in a room and began to philosophize with her about the bitter circumstances in which he now found himself (poor thing!), Shyne-Feygl also had an opportunity to pour out her bitter heart and to tell Yakub the valet about her most interesting biography.

"Shyne-Feygl—are you following?—was in love with the bookkeeper David Fridvald, a rare personage who dressed in the latest Western fashion.

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91 Dreykop: someone who wheels and deals in business, thought usually not with great success.

92 A more idiomatic version of this ironic expression would be “showereded him with kindness.”
The romance between them had been going on for some time. She wrote passionate letters, sang sweet songs, and carried on until the lovers settled on a rendezvous, a place where they could meet face-to-face. That place was Trokhim's garden. And so the lovers met every day in Trokhim's garden... until her parents were warned... Her parents had intended to marry her off to the Rebbe's grandson, whose face radiated a divine countenance and who dressed according to the latest styles published in the rabbinical journals (word for word). But Shyne-Feygel put her foot down and said that she would rather die than marry this other man. She only would agree to marry David the bookkeeper!

"Or so Shyne-Feygel believed. David the bookkeeper apparently thought differently. This character was involved simultaneously with two beauties— with Shyne-Feygel and with Khavele (and perhaps with Trokhim's daughter too, though I am only guessing...). He wrote the same poems for both of them, he led them on and he tasted the fruits of love with both of them...

"So what did they do? The betrayal led them to establish a bond with one another, and they agreed to play a prank on him. Shyne-Feygel promised him that if he dressed up like a woman, she would go with him to the village of Haruntshik where they could enjoy the fruits of their love...

"The plan went off without a hitch. David dressed up like a noblewoman, excuse the comparison, and waited by the church for his beloved Shyne-Feygel. The young demoiselles he had deceived then appeared. They informed the town gentiles that there was a horse-thief dressed as a woman hanging around behind the church. The gentiles caught him and threw him in jail.

"But David was soon released. He left the town safely and over the course of six years married three times (he remarried every two years). Yes, David the bookkeeper is one of Shomer's rogues, the type of person who leads people astray, like all of Shomer's heroes.

"In the end, Shyne-Feygel married the Rebbe's grandson, the precious Yankele, who cast her off, as we already know...

"What a procedure it is to trudge one's way through Shomer's novel! Couldn't he have just told the story of this rascal, this knave David and his affairs with Shyne-Feygel, Khavele, Trokhim's daughter (that gentile lass), and the many other unfortunate women whom he asphyxiated like a polecat stranglings chickens? No, instead he led us in and out of the forest, over hills and through valleys. First he had to tell us some story about a guest from Kovne in room 62 who happened to stray with the young wife of the guest from Lodz in room 52... And after that, we were told about Yakub the poor valet who fainted, who was "lavished with gold," and who had a strange woman foisted upon him (not that ugly, mind you, even if she was another man's wife)... And why is the story about Yakub necessary? Because Shyne-Feygel needs a character to appear suddenly to whom she can reveal her most interesting life story, from which one can derive a moral exemplum.
"In my opinion, this nice story, like the rest of Shomer's most interesting novels, could have been a bit shorter, in this way:

Once upon a time there was a hen and a rooster -
The story begins;
Once there was a cow and a calf -
The story is half done!
Once there was a cat and a mouse -
The story concludes...93

"One story ends, and another begins, a brand new one...but it is actually an old one—rearranged inside-out, haphazardly stitched, hurriedly patched, and mixed together from scraps and bits—so long as the end product is a big book, a novel in two parts with an epilogue.

"This is precisely what the famous Hebrew critic David Frishman94 remarked in the Jewish newspaper Hayoun95 when he said that the narratives in Shomer's novels are not well-connected and that they do not relate to one another. Rather, he added, they are threaded together like beads on a string or apples on a piece of twine; they have no real relationship to one another. But does our fabricator of novels care what a Frishman or a Criticus or anyone else says about him? Shomer responds that any criticism is the result of jealousy and hatred, and that he will not allow himself to be discouraged.96

93. Sholem Aleichem bases this on a popular Russian folk rhyme:

Zhitli byli dre nowhely
Vol i skazchke nachalo
Zhitli byli dre pingrina
Vol i skazke serejida
Zhitli byli dre gusia
Vol i skazchka trisa.

94. David Frishman (1859–1922), one of the major writers and critics of the renaissance of modern Hebrew literature, and a champion of art for art's sake.


96. Shomer was not shy in defending himself against his critics during this period. A vigorous debate among his critics and defenders occurred in 1887–88 in the pages of Yudishes folksblat (for a list of the relevant articles and essays, see note 126). In a letter to the editor of the Yudishes folksblat 10 (1887) he asserted: "One must provide a child with something sweet, even when one wants to give him bitter medicine. I know that if I had just provided my readers with moralistic writings they would not have picked up a single book." In his feuilleton "A patshafa patsh," Yudishes folksblat 30 (1887), he attacked the new generation of critics: "I am not
"I nearly forgot to tell you that the novel *A Story, Short but Sweet* also includes a saccharine-sweet song that the two heroines sing with their eyes rolled to the heavens (sweet David wrote the song):

> Nobody knows how miserable I am,
> How my heart desires you,
> Fly quickly, my beautiful angel,
> Come quickly, Oh, revive me... and so on.

"This is just the place for such a song by Goldfaden." 97

I am Jacob the valet
To live without a drink is useless,
I know the Pentateuch and the Bible too
The Righteous Haman had a good head,
And Korah was a first-class drunk,
Whereas Lot, for whom alcohol had no value,
was swallowed by the earth
Pharaoh put on a banquet for Haman
And Abraham our Patriarch was there too,
And Jethro stood on the other side of the door
And Esther was hanged,
Woe is me!

"These are the types of songs, in fact, that would have been written by such heroes as David and the rest of the servants who figure so prominently in *Shomer*'s works, rather than the inflated, sentimental and philosophical poems we encounter in almost every one of his novels.

"Yes, *Shomer* "knows the Pentateuch and the Bible too"... This is quite evident from the citations he borrows from Ecclesiastes and from Hebrew poetry to begin his novels...

"Honored jurors! A writer of the people—a true artist and poet—is a mirror in which the rays of his epoch and generation are reflected. He portrays and reflects life in the same way that a pool of pure water reflects the rays of the sun. That is why vision is first born in the soul of a talented writer who is a leader of the human community. That is why whenever some disaster occurs, some punishment from God, some misfortune, the refined sensibility of the poet, the veritable conscience of the people, is the first to feel it.

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97. Sholem Aleichem is being ironic here. To the best of my knowledge, this is not a song from Goldfaden's repertoire.
Similarly, at a redemptive moment or when a piece of good news or celebration comes to pass, the first to announce it is the inspired writer who is blessed by God with a rich spirit, with elevated comprehension, with refined understanding, with a soft, warm heart. This is why there is a strong, eternal bond between a writer and his people. This is why the writer is a servant of God, a priest, a prophet, and an advocate, and every people loves such a servant who comforts it through its misfortunes, celebrates its joys, and guides it through its various ideas, thoughts, strivings, hopes, and so on. This is why, I submit, not a single event can come to pass within the life of a people, neither a celebration nor a disaster, that the writer does not address fully down to its very essence.

"Lately, Jews have been through bitter times. There have been many occurrences, changes, difficulties, and much suffering. This bitter period has affected every writer, and prompted them to be among the first to respond. And respond they did. Open any Jewish book or newspaper—either in Hebrew, Yiddish or Russian—and in it you will find a trace of the times, you will discover that the Jewish world did not doze off: we debated, conversed, took action, planned gatherings, raised money, built colonies in the Land of Israel, emigrated to America, whispered about Spain... in general we went for it. Whether it did any good or not, that's a different question. What matters is that everyone got worked up. Most active of all was that small group who grabbed for the pen, picked up on all the nuances, worried about the masses, and remained interested in the fate of their poor brothers who had been left behind.

"Though Shomer is a cripple and a bad writer, he is a writer nevertheless. He, too, holds a pen in hand, consumes impressive quantities of ink, and ruins a lot of paper. Is it possible that the last few years have not had any impact on him? Is it possible that no Jewish matter affected him apart from werewolves, vipers, uninhibited Cecilias with their "sparkling diamonds," "Lisettes," usurers, and rogues? No! In his last novel (or should I say, in the most recent of his latest novels, in case he writes some more!) I read the following words with great delight: "Palestine," "patriotism," "Jewish Question," "pioneer." I devoured the novel right down to the bones. But it came back up on me, it poisoned my head, damaged my stomach, caused me heartache, and destroyed my appetite.

"This nice novel full of national sentiment has the lovely title *Di goldene kelber* (The Golden Calves). It passes itself off as a novel of Kiev, as a reflection of the holy city of Kiev. But it is related to Kiev to the same degree that the rest of Shomer's novels are related to Jewish life. If it were not for the fact that in the novel there was mention of the Podol and Hotel Belle-

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98 *Di goldene kelber oder der katsav in salon: roman im tsvey teyln*, Vilna 1887.
THE JUDGMENT OF SHOMER

vue, it could have taken place in Krisielevke, Shepetivka,  
Jerusalem, Philadelphia, or even on the other side of the Sambatyon, behind  
the mountains of darkness, among the so-called red Jews. That is how natural  
it's scenes are. That is how believably the characters come across... But why  
don't we turn to the novel itself?

"In this latest novel, Shomer made great strides forward, a major achieve-  
ment. In short, there are no rogues. Instead of a rogue, there is a tyrant. The  
worst of all tyrants in The Golden Clouds is the speculator Yoyne Faygshteyn.  
Like the rest of Shomer's heroes, Yoyne Faygshteyn was a yeshiva student,  
a nobody, a little snob before he became filthy rich. Of course, he made  
the life of his first wife so miserable that she died of consumption, and  
after her death he flirted with some fifty girls (how's that for a scoundrel?).  
He courted all the available young misses in Kiev, but he set his sights on the  
most beautiful Helena, daughter of Abraham Risfeld. Perhaps you are won- 
dering why he desired her more than any of the other girls in Kiev? This is  
how Shomer explains it to us in his folder:

We accept that one is willing to spend a lot of money on a diamond. If you  
were to ask someone why do you love that diamond so much? Is it because  
of its luster? And why is it worth a thousand rubles? - Why? Because every-  
one likes a diamond! In the same way, one does not get engaged because  
the bride-to-be pleases him, but rather because she is desired by everyone  
else. The opposite is also true. One takes an aversion to a woman if she  
does not appeal to others. In a word, in the practical world we have thou- 
ousands of examples that tell us that... and so forth.

"What a foolish lesson. Why does one want a diamond? Because it is  
desired by everyone else too. Why did Yoyne set his eyes on Helena?

99. Close in sound to Krasilovka, a town near Kiev where Sholem Aleichem resided  
during the composition of The Judgment of Shomer. The name later became the  
inspiration for his fictional shetel of Kasrilova.

100. Shepetivka (also Shepetovka): shetel in the Western Ukraine, burial place of the  
Hasidic rebbe Pinhas of Koretz.

101. Lahishin (also Lohiszyn): small shetel located in several kilometers northwest of  
Pinsk, in Belarus.

102. The Sambatyon is part of Jewish mythical geography. It is believed to be the river  
beyond which the ten Lost Tribes of Israel were exiled by the Assyrians. The  
Talmud describes how the river rages during the week and is calm only on the  
Sabbath; this has prevented the lost tribes from crossing it to return from their  
exile. Over the centuries, the Sambatyon has captured the imagination of Jewish  
mystics, messianists, and travellers. The "red Jews" (natives) refer to those  
peoples, both in Asia and in the New World, whom various Jewish travellers have  
believed to be descendants of the Lost Tribes. S.Y. Abramovitch's The Abridged  
Travels of Benjamin the Third (1878), one of the most important satic novels  
of classic Yiddish fiction, is a mock epic about a in flu ent i sh who sets out from his  
shetel in search of the red Jews across the Sambatyon.
Because she was the desire of Zisblum, the attorney. If Zisblum had not been attracted to Helena, then Yoyne would not have been attracted to her either. In that case, Helena would have married, Yoyne would have done whatever he wanted, Zisblum would still be an attorney, and Shomer would have been left, God forbid, without a novel!

"Who is this Helena? Helena is a girl, pretty as a picture, like a rose in the month of May... She is exactly like Lisette, Elizabeth, Zinaida and all of the other pretty girls in Shomer's novels. Shomer writes: "She was well-educated and smart but she did not like Jews. She always read anti-Semitic newspapers such as Kievtlanin 103 and Novoe vremia 104. But suddenly (always suddenly?) something changed in Helena. She was transformed from being a self-hating Jew who wanted to be baptized into a passionate Jewish nationalist, all thanks to the attorney Zisblum who opened her eyes to the fact that the Kievtlanin was a big lie (may its name be blotted out!). Together with her native pride, there sparked within her a sacred love for the upstanding lawyer. It burned so passionately that soon enough she found herself at the piano singing sweet songs... This hero Zisblum was so good and so honest that he did not allow himself, like some of Shomer's other heroes, to partake of the fruits of love. As he states: "I have never been an idealist. I have always been a realist..." However, in order for you to understand the nature of Zisblum's realism, I am obliged to read you an entire scene from The Golden Calfs:

103. Kievtlanin (1864-1918), a semi-official Russian anti-Semitic periodical, edited by V. Ia. Shugin (until 1878) and then his student D.I. Pikhno. Initially founded to promote Russification, the journal quickly concerned itself with the so-called "Jewish Question." It regularly published critical articles on aspects of Jewish education, culture, economics, and political power. In 1873, its pages published "The Jewish Cemetery in Prague" (a translation from the German novel Biarritz), which later inspired the famous anti-Semitic forgery The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

104. Novoe vremia (New Times, 1868-1917) one of the most influential conservative newspapers in the Russian empire. It increasingly adopted an anti-Semitic course after it was purchased by A.S. Suvorin in 1876, who transformed it into a mass-market nationalist publication. It was a leading proponent of the Blood Libel and blamed Jewish economic practices for the pogroms launched against them in 1881. The year before Sholem Aleichem published The Judgment of Shomer, the newspaper characterized the "Jew" as follows: "He directs all his inner strength toward disturbing that foundation of religious, political, and civil life upon which are based the contemporary states that give him equal rights... The Jew remains the same enemy of the rest of the world that he has been from the time of the exodus from Egypt. With political and civil rights, he possesses additional means and resources to harm his enemy, to trample on him and to seek his destruction" (August 26, 1887, quoted in J. Klier Imperial Russia's Jewish Question (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 47-48).
Yoyn Faygshteyn knocked at room 6, Hotel Bellevue, Kiev.

"Ah! Mr. Faygshteyn," Zisblum called out warmly. "I came to see your accommodations and to inquire about your well-being."

"I have a wonderful room and, thank God, I am healthy,"

"Have you had a chance to see our Kiev?"

"Yes, Kiev is a fine city, but it does not compare to Warsaw."

"Have you visited anyone?"

"Yes, I have already been to Mr. Rischel's..."

"Really? So you have already caught a glimpse of your future bride?"

"I had the pleasure of speaking with her."

"So what is your opinion of her?"

"She is a rare beauty, and intelligent to boot; one can make a lady of her."

"It seems to me that it would be appropriate then to wish you congratulations?"

"From my perspective, yes. But I don't know whether the other side is going to agree."

"Oh! Don't worry about it!" Yoyn said. "She will consider herself fortunate if she marries you because she has already been around the block..."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You ought to know that...today she likes this man and tomorrow she prefers that one. She promises one that she is going to be his wife, and then becomes his wife... You get it? And the next day she goes for someone different, falls in love with him, and also becomes his wife, and so forth..."

"What are you talking about?"

"Exactly what you hear!"

"This is totally disgusting," Zisblum shouted and spit. "You are a true friend. I am indebted to you! You saved me..."

Zisblum remained scathed, absorbed in his thoughts. Suddenly... another knock on the door! Rischel's servant entered and brought with him a note-card.

"Forgive me, Sir. I have something to ask you."

"Ask."

"Was Mr. Faygshteyn here?"

"Yes, he was."

"And he must have told you who knows what about Fräulein Helena, because moments before her arrival here she drove him from her home."

"Why did she throw him out?" Zisblum asked surprised.

"Because he is a dishonest, vile man... No doubt he spoke ill of Helena... she had just thrown him out... I can promise you that this golden lass has no equal. I swear, she is a girl with all the best virtues."

"This is the first time I have ever heard a servant speaking well about his employer."
Not all servants are the same. Just as there are fine and abject people, so are there many servants, "feine Charaktere und niederträchtige" (the servant speaks philosophically in in-your-face German).\(^{105}\)

"If that is the case, I will pay a visit to Fräulein Helena later today..."

"This is the type of character that Shomer calls a "realist." This is one of the best heroes in his repertoire. For him such a character is an angel, a wise man, an ideal, and this incarnation of the ideal is embodied by Zisblum the realist with whom Shomer sympathizes so strongly. This idiot takes it upon himself to educate and improve Fräulein Helena, who has grown up on a diet of the Kleeblatt and the Noven Vremia, and he begins to converse with her about Palestine and colonization, and expresses himself not as a lawyer but like a talmudic bench-warmer, jumping from Bismarck to the Turks and back to the Ishmaelites.

"As I see it," Helena said to him, "you have already become an idealist."

"No, I am speaking very realistically!" Zisblum responded, "I tell you, I have firmly decided to become a settler in Palestine."

"But how will you work the land, when you have to sit hovering over books?"

"I will get accustomed to working the land the same way I have gotten used to hovering over books."

"And how can you be sure that you will not be driven from Palestine?"

"First, the Turks do not drive people from their territories. Second, if there was an attempt to get rid of us, the European governments would stand up for us..."

At that moment a servant arrived...

"Whenever Shomer finds himself in strange territory, confused, stuck, and he cannot find his way out of it, he falls back on the strategy (crafty lad!) of sending in a servant, or a servant girl, or a policeman to get him out of the...

\(^{105}\) The term employed in the original is *mekhteyse dayish*. For the sake of readability in English, I opt to translate it throughout the text as "in-your-face German." Other possible translations might have included "there's German for you," "pompous German," or "German with pleasure." Throughout The Judgment of Shomer, Sholem Aleichem criticizes Shomer's decision to employ dayishmerish (a conscious imitation of German) in his writing. Sholem Aleichem had both artistic and national reasons for opposing the dayishmerish influence in modern Yiddish letters. Shomer's Germanisms seemed overly inflated and constructed, obscuring Sholem Aleichem's own interest in creating a natural-sounding Yiddish that reflected the everyday vernacular of ordinary Jews. However, as linguist Max Weinreich explains, Sholem Aleichem's antipathy toward dayishmerish was a relatively recent phenomenon: "The concept of dayishmerish came into being gradually only in the nineteenth century. Up to that time the attitude toward the German determinant was neutral. Utilizing more German-component elements was a question of style within the boundary of Yiddish" (History of the Yiddish Language, 418).
thicket... Thanks to this servant who interrupts the action, we never really know how familiar Shomer is with the question of Palestine, about which many other writers have already poured out substantial quantities of ink, broken many pencils, and consumed heaps of paper... Shomer saw or heard that the world was speaking of Palestine and colonization, so he also tossed in a word about Palestine and colonization, and he doesn’t come back to it again. At the end of the novel he informs us that Zisblum is in a settlement in Palestine and that he and all the colonists are living there happily, as in the days of King Solomon (literally), each one sitting in his vineyard and under his fig tree (that’s what he writes, word for word). And that is all. With those few words, he has acquitted himself of the matter. And now we know that Shomer is also a nationalist and an admirer of Palestine. So what do people have against him?

*It would have been nice had Shomer actually provided us with flesh-and-blood characters, with real-life Jews, whether in Palestine or America, as long as they are flesh-and-blood and not just broomsticks, fireplace pokers, and shovels, not a cast of puppets performing for little children who dance, jump, fight among themselves, spin, and fall apart to the audience’s delight.*

*In this novel there is only one contemporary figure—Mr. Zisblum. Another character, Miss Zina, is also an interesting type. It is worth getting acquainted with her...* 

*Shomer heard that one should laugh at the assimilated—that is, at those who say that Jews ought to mix in with all other peoples. So he went and inserted into The Golden Calfes a strange kind of creature, the Jewish girl Zina who was half man and half woman (that’s how Shomer refers to her). Her idée-fixe, her obsession, was female emancipation. That is to say, she wanted to educate women and give them all the same rights as their husbands. In one word, she was a kind of androgyne—half male and half female, with short hair, always talking about books, emancipation, and so forth.*

*But since this androgyne Zina still had the delicate heart of a woman, she fell in love with one of Shomer’s tyrants, Judah Krum, an aristocrat from Kiev. This Krum asked her to rob her father, the rich usurer Pleyter. He persuaded her that they should then flee Kiev together and live it up elsewhere. Of course, this rogue Judah Krum tricked Zina out of her few rubles and never really loved her. They tasted the fruits of love and Zina got...you get it?* 

*But do you think that this is the end of Zina’s epic? No, Shomer wants to take revenge on this educated woman Zina and on all women who dare to speak about education, emancipation, freedom, and so on. So he sent her another miserable pest: a gambler, a drunk, a pickpocket by the name of Brandvelt,* 106 who began to court our beautiful Zina. Here is an episode from their strange courtship:

106 Brandvelt: a variation on brent a vel (‘burn the world’).
"Good morning! You know, my darling Zina," Brandvelt said to her once Judah had left, "I am ready for our journey. I want to run away with you tonight, my love..."

Zina was silent.

"Why aren't you answering me, my angel? As long as we are not together, my life is not a life. You know how passionate my love is for you. You are my very soul. So what do you say, shall we take off tonight...?"

"Good morning! Here's a groshen, give me a candle! Are you going to give it to me or not?" It is with such enthusiasm that these lovers, the viper Brandvelt and the androgynous Zina, converse. Their passionate love ends with their robbing the tyrant Judah Krum and escaping. This is when Zina's sad tale truly begins, full of troubles, disasters, and blows of misfortune. For the gambler Brandvelt is an even greater rogue (still more rogues?) than Judah Krum. He is prepared to kill both the miserable Zina and the child fathered by her first lover Judah Krum... Suddenly... suddenly a police officer appears and brings with him the usurer Pleyter, who is now going by the new name Kopelberg and who recognizes his miserable daughter. Tears flow by the river-full! In short, a big deal, a tumult, a din, money flying around, a policeman, someone going to jail, a rogue, werewolves, vipers, dragons!!!

"But this novel is not exactly my main point. It is like the rest of Shomer's novels: the villain meets his downfall and the good guy is saved... I only wanted to show you the degree to which Shomer pursued the latest fashion and took it upon himself to produce a "contemporary" novel about how Jews live today. Shomer attempted to portray figures from both categories: a patriot and an assimilated woman, a lover of Palestine and a... what? Even he does not know! Shomer hears the tune but he can't sing on key...

In the story "Alienu" (Homeward), published in Der veker in 1887, the new Yiddish writer Marie Lerner also tried to portray one of these Jewish women whose education took her so far afield that she almost forgot that she was a daughter of Israel, and, boy, did she get burned because of it.

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107. Sholem Aleichem here is playfully acknowledging the influence of S.Y. Abramovitsh, whose character Mendele the Book Peddler frequently employed the expression "nischto bin l'kh oyn" ("but that's not what I'm getting at") as an ironic rhetorical strategy.

108. Der yudisher veke, Yiddish miscellany published in Odessa, politically allied with the Zionist Hovevei Zion.

109. Marie Lerner (nee Miriam Rabinovitsh, 1860–1927), Yiddish short story writer and playwright. During the 1880s her stories appeared in such publications as Der veke and Yudishes folksblat. Her play Di agune appeared in the second volume of Spektor's Hayz-fraynt. Before World War II, several of her plays (in manuscript) from the early 1880s were found in the YIVO archives in Vilna.
"Now is not the proper time to discuss whether this woman was a realistic character or how "Homeward" stands up to criticism. But at the very least Marie Lerner offered us a portrait of a Jewish girl, a flesh-and-blood person, and we now understand with whom we are dealing. We have some concept of such a person. We can say whether such a character is good or bad. But what can one say about Shomer's androgyne? What kind of creature did he dream up? What kind of comedy is it? The Golden Calves is not comedy, it is a vaudeville sketch, a type of Purim play, even worse than vaudeville! But Shomer loves vaudeville. Here on the table is another of Shomer's vaudevillian numbers, a true story taken from his consumptive portfolio: A khasene on a kale.\footnote{A khasene on a kale: a rare geshikhte, araysgenumen fun tshakhatker plikes, Vilna 1884 or 1885.} (A Wedding Without a Bride). It tells the important story of how a rabbi attempted to marry his 'precious' son to an attractive girl, and only after the ceremony did it become clear that the bride was not a girl but rather Moshke the servant! A satire? Why aren't you laughing?"

"It is amazing that when Shomer wants us to laugh, we do not laugh; and when he is trying to be earnest, sober, or tragic, then we want to explode with laughter. For example, in the novel It Serves Him Right, Shomer says that the names of the characters are a good clue for the reader that they will have something to laugh about. I was not lazy and I read the entire book about Hantsi Dreyze the tavern keeper, Shmaye Fayfer and Berke Tsimbler the musicians, Mr. Eplkvas,\footnote{Fayfer: one who blows (on a musical instrument); Tsimbler: one who bangs on cymbals or other percussion instruments; Eplkvas: apple cider.} and many others. I was not moved to crack a smile.

"So now you are familiar with Shomer's satiric talent. Here in The Golden Calves and in his other serious novels that he fiercely prevents from being reprinted (God forbid) without his permission. However, I insist that there is actually something to laugh about, seeing how Shomer imitates the French novelists Dumas, Paul de Kock, and others. He is raving mad, he gets lost in strange happenings, he jams the locks full of wax, he brings dead characters back to life, people are poisoned along the way, children are abandoned in broad daylight, millions are withdrawn from banks under false pretenses, letters are stolen from the post office, little children are kidnapped, there are duels, arson, spilt blood... This all takes place where? In Kiev, in Odessa, in Bobruisk, in Nyosvyz, all before our very eyes. We remain silent! I ask you: isn't this something to laugh about? Could we demand any greater satire than this from Shomer?"

"Honored jurors, now that we have familiarized ourselves with our accused from various angles, now that we know, thank God, that Shomer is a moralist, a satirist, a poet, a philosopher, a bellettrist and a psychologist, let
us now consider him from an aesthetic perspective too. I mean by this his style, his language. If the bride is neither smart nor educated, neither pious nor rich, at least let her be pretty! In every literature one finds uselessness, nonsense, empty chatter. If the rhetoric itself is beautiful, then perhaps it might be beneficial to the reader in that sense. But this quality is also absent from Shomer, who has his own language, his own variety of Yiddish that one must refer to by the name: in-your-face German. His jargon is neither Yiddish nor Russian nor German, but rather “half German and half goyish.” I doubt if ten percent of his readers understand his in-your-face German, with its “Brautigam, Kameraden, Frauenemancipation...” “Immer erworben Respekt...” “daustenhat,” “Richard hat sich bewaffnet mit sein könfigen Ehrennamen.” “Sogar schon diktiert die Reden von er wird tragen...” “Jemanden beschuldigen ohne zu weinen...” “Sie hat feind gehab seine Physionomie mit die Manieren...” “Sympathizer” (sympathize?). To extract all such in-your-face German words from all of Shomer’s novels is an impossible task. He also often uses Russian, and translates skillfully. For example: “Benjamin and Aaron robbed a church and both smelled of hard labor.” (Oni oba pakhli katorzhnymi rabotami?) “The ordinary Ulman was lying on the edge of the abyss... (Ulman nakhodilsya vozly dyinki propast?)... “Daniel softened him with his tears...” “The clock struck midnight...” “... the root cause of the terrible situation...” “The convict...” “The understudy...” and so on.

“All of Shomer’s male heroes are cut from the same cloth as regards beauty: a picture-perfect blond, tall, blue eyes, and so on. This is how all his heroines are portrayed: “She was eighteen years old, a beauty in the full sense of the word; her alabaster white face, her long black hair like black sparkling velvet cascaded down over her shoulders, and her black fiery eyes reminded one of Venus.” (from The Poits Jew)

“Nature in Shomer is also described implausibly and with in-your-face German. For example: “Das war in Monat Mai. Die ganze Natur war geschmückt wie a schöne Kette in Radsen, es war a prächtige Landschaft...die Sonne strahlh so prächtig, so meistetisch, so lieblich, punkt wie das englisches Gesicht Ihr geliebten Tanzenwald...”

“I have in my mind a different Yiddish novel by Spektor, Der yiddisher muzzik (The Jewish Peasant). Let us compare how this writer describes nature in simple Yiddish, without resorting to Shomer’s in-your-face German:

112 “It was the month of May. All of nature was bejeweled like a beautiful bride in roses, it was a splendid landscape... the sun shone magnificently, so majestically, so lovely, just as her angelic face shone toward her beloved Tanzenwald.” In the citation above, Sholem Aleichem is drawing attention not only to Shomer’s overblown rhetoric and mangled German diction, but also to specific mistakes. For instance, there is no such word in German as meistetisch (meisterisch and majestätisch do exist).
113 See note 5.
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It was a very hot day in the month of Tamuz, one of those burning hot days about which schoolkids say: "God revealed the celestial orb." Humans and other creatures find such days hard to bear. They look forward to the cool night. Small children splash in the river like ducks, but the annoying flies and nasty bugs thank and praise God for such a warm day—they crawl over man and beast and every living thing, sucking out their warm blood. It is impossible to escape the annoyance. In the marketplace in the middle of the city of N—v, people were moving about slowly and quickly, here and there... Merchants, shop-wives, peddlers, and hawkers were all sitting on the earth frying in the sun, looking for customers... Everyone was consumed by his own affairs: the salesperson was running to purchase a bushel of wheat or a measure of millet from the peasant, with the hope that he could earn a groschen for bread. The porter carefully transported his cargo in order to receive ten groschen for food. The pauper wandered around begging for a tiny morsel... Small children ran home from school to eat lunch. The teacher's assistant carried a basketful of greasy meat and milk pots to the house mistress for which he would probably receive his monthly payment... It was steaming, sweat flowed, but people wiped the sweat with their sleeves and carried on...

"In a word, you have before you a familiar scene from actual Jewish life. The shopkeepers in search of buyers, the hungry school kids, the teacher's assistant with the dishes... It is familiar, we recognize it, we remember it—it is as true as truth itself. It is clear as day. And everything is the way it should be. This is what aesthetics, poetry, art demand. This is how one should compose descriptive scenes. All authors should be required to provide these types of descriptions—only what is possible, only that which can be found in real life. Not like Shomer's marvelous paradise; Jewish counts, girls named Elizabeth, angels or rogues of whom we can't even imagine because they have nothing to do with our lives, they have no relationship to us whatsoever. Since everything is borrowed from Paris, it comes across as strange in Kiev, Odessa, Bobruisk, Eyshishok, like a monkey in a tuxedo with a top-hat, as natural as a clown with Queen Esther among Purim players who yell and shriek and confuse to such an extent that one is glad to be rid of them at last. Shomer's rogues, angels, old maids, werewolves, vipers, and remaining cast of characters also yell and shriek and confuse us, and we are also delighted when we can finally be rid of them.

"I still have something to say about a few remaining points, about several special nuggets contained in these fifty novels by Shomer that are spread on the table before us. Only God knows whether I will be able to mention all of the wonders that prove that Shomer is an expert in the Trivium and the Quadrivium, in all seventy tongues—all knowledge is on the tip of his tongue—Talmud, history, mythology, law, medicine, philosophy, and so on. 111

111 A reference to a talmudic tradition according to which there are seventy primary nations and languages in the world, derived from the list of Noah's grandsons. A midrash teaches that Moses taught the Torah in seventy languages.
“In the novel *Di ayzerne frøy*115 (The Iron Lady), he translates the Hebrew “ayelet ohalim” as the goddess of beauty—Aurora. But it seems to me that every schoolchild who has glanced at a book of ancient mythology knows that the goddess of beauty is Venus, and that Aurora is the morning star, or “ayelet ha-shahar;” and that the God of love is Amour, not Aurora...

“In the novel *Di ungliklikhe libe*116 (Unhappy Love) he translates the Hebrew word “vanity” as fanaticism. So how would he translate the verse from Ecclesiastes: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity”—fanaticism of fanaticism, everyone is a fanatic?

“In the novel *The Rich Beggar Shomer* says: “Even a génie like the poet Luzatto...” The reader asks himself, what kind of species is that, a génie? But *Shomer* is a Frenchman. We read in his “*Di tсидkonyes*”117 (Pious Woman): “bonjour and bonsoir,” good morning and good evening.

“*Le mni an’ emei? For whom do I toil*118 *This is a talmudic question,* says *Shomer* in his novel *The Treasure.* But where does such a citation appear among our sages? Who said it? History is silent in this regard...

*Shomer* is a great Talmudist, but he is an even better Hebrew poet. His Hebrew poems, which he provides at the beginning of every novel, are a beautiful gift, a type of bonus to the novel itself, and today people are really wild for bonuses! But the majority of such Hebrew bonuses from *Shomer* are... since it’s not connected to Yiddish, I’ll hold my tongue.

“In the novel *Der shlimazdiger hoz*119 (The Unlucky Hare), *Shomer* writes offhandedly; “*It was prophesied about Reb Bereitut from Koretz that he must be the messiah because you would have to look far and wide to find such an idiot, such a golem.* “Quite a notion of the messiah! We should show it to our most talented, nationalist Jewish writers—what would they have to say about it?

“In the novel *Between Two Flames*, *Shomer* says that Nathan was brought up in “*milk and in honey*”—have you ever heard a metaphor like this?

“In one of his most interesting novels (I’ve already forgotten which one) *Shomer* writes that “*the heroine was ruined because she could not get married before the age of twenty. It was forbidden, according to Russian

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118. Title of a famous poem (1871) by the Hebrew enlightenment poet Judah Leib Gordon in which he laments the lack of a Hebrew readership and critiques Russification among segments of the Jewish intellectual elite.

THE JUDGMENT OF SHOMER

law..." Who does not know that according to Russian law a man cannot marry before the age of eighteen, and a woman before the age of sixteen?

"In Der spekulant120 (The Speculator) Shomer writes: "Today’s ordinary Jews who have reached the summit of happiness have taken an aversion to their religion. Who gave them their horns?—The speculator did!" This is already related to psychology and to the political economy with which Shomer is entirely at home... Is it possible to catch all such precious finds which are scattered throughout Shomer’s novels? You can demand such insights from a true writer, but in the case of a scribbler like Shomer...

"Honored jurors, now that I have proven the degree to which our accused is a manufacturer of novels, now that I have shown you what kind of "writer of the people" Shomer really is, I hope that your good judgment, your taste and your pure conscience will point you to the conclusion that you need to deal with him sternly, that you should not spare him, because that is what is rightfully earned by such a harmful writer, such a murderer of the people. Therefore you can do two good deeds: you can condemn a literary huckster, and you can protect our poor young Yiddish from other such parasites. I am not saying this for my own sake, honored jurors. I am telling you this in the name of literature, in the name of readers, in the name of our entire people!"

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The prosecutor took his seat and Shomer’s attorney rose, cleared his throat, and began his defense in the following words:

"Honored judges and jurors! My talented opponent, the prosecutor, certainly painted you a pretty picture. He presented my client, Mr. Shomer, as a terrible parasite, as a murderer of the people, as a butcher, as a thief. But that is simply not true. His interpretation is completely tendentious. He is the type of prosecutor who snoops around and seeks out only the worst. In my opinion, it is no great achievement to besmirch even the purest man. If we look hard enough we can find plenty of faults and imperfections in anyone. Everything must have its boundary, its limits. It is no great art to toss an entire mountain of shortcomings at someone, to search, rummage, and dig around, all in order to ruin the reputation of an author who has written so much for his people. To be honest, I will not tell you that my client is a great, highly praised bellettrist. But neither will I pronounce that he is not a writer at all, or that he does not have a speck of talent. A hundred novels, honored jurors, a hundred novels are no small thing. It is not so easy to create plots for several thousand heroes! The prosecutor says that they are all hackneyed versions of French novels. Even if this were the case, it is more difficult to adapt a hundred novels than to be a prosecutor! Especially since

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120. Der spekulant oder isrey meysim geven tantsn: a vare geshikhte, Vilna 1886.
not all of them are adapted. The majority are the product of Shomer's own imagination. The prosecutor cannot deny this. Even if they have little connection to Jewish life, this does not mean that Shomer is guilty. The public, the uneducated class of readers, demands his type of merchandise, and the booksellers, the itinerant salesmen, seek out his variety of novels, nothing better—the only criterion is that they be cheap and plentiful! Sirs, I ask you, how is Shomer guilty if people come to him and pay him by the sheet to write such-and-such a work by such-and-such a title? It is purchased by the warehouse-full, the public reads it—people probably need it! If it were not needed, people would not buy it. But since people are willing to hand over their hard-earned money for it, why should they not be able to have it? There is a saying among the gentiles: "A fool gives, and the clever one takes"...

"The prosecutor makes a comparison between my client and Abramovitch, Linetski, Gelfdaden, and so forth. Woe is me! Who said that Shomer should be compared to them? Even Shomer himself would never say such a thing! He is not such an idiot as to persuade himself of such a pile of rubbish. The prosecutor calls him a murderer, a butcher, a robber. Honored jurors, take a look at my client. Does he have the face of a murderer, a butcher, a robber? What kind of evil, God forbid, could Shomer have intended with his novels? He does not mean any harm, God forbid, to anyone. He does not want to provoke anyone or to ruin anyone's livelihood. If a businessman wants to earn a ruble, why shouldn't he? Have you imagined what is possible for a Jewish writer to earn from his writing? I would not wish it on any of my enemies. I am certain that were my client to have something of a decent income—a store, a commission, a position—he would gladly forfeit his name, his reputation, his literary career, along with everything else. But what is he supposed to do, honored jurors? He has to live, he has to eat! A Jewish writer also has a stomach. The prosecutor demonstrates that Shomer is not a moralist, not a satirist, not a poet, not a belletrist, not a psychologist, not a philosopher, and not an aesthete. Very well, I agree. I concede that to him. But I would be interested to know who that writer is who contains within him all of these aforementioned virtues? One must be a serious pedant to demand all of this from a single person. So what is this really all about? Is there not among the fifty or so novels that the prosecutor has mentioned a single work that has some value, a chapter, or even a single page? It cannot be! It cannot be! On the contrary, I know from my own experience that

* In the novel *The Treasure*, Shomer explicitly says that he would do business with the fools who would have erected an iron monument in his honor after his death; in his lifetime he would take from them a third of what the monument should cost... Shomer has desires! Napoleon once said: "A man is not a soldier if he never has the ambition of becoming a general."

Sholem Aleichem
many young ladies who read Shomer's most interesting novels have cried countless tears. No doubt, if they weep over his work, it must be worth something! We have further proof that his works have something of value to them; there are many imitators who make use of Shomer's name on their creations. I have here in my portfolio a nice rag, a novel with the title: *Dor aristokratke* 121 (The Aristocrat) by Abraham Isaac Bukhbinder from Odessa. The name of the real author appears in small letters, and above it, printed in big letters, we read: composed in the style of Shomer (in really big letters!).

"The second treasure is *Di hadase*, a drama in four acts by Shimon Bekerman, also from Odessa, and also written in the style of Shomer (printed in big letters). In order for it to seem precisely like one of Shomer's works, on which there always appears the statement "reprint strictly forbidden," Shimon Bekerman added the following statement at the bottom, though it came out a little differently: "Re print strict for bidden!"

"Not long ago, a new type of writer, some fellow with the name Ulrih Kalms (perhaps from Odessa also?) reworked Shomer's novel *A patsh fun zayn lom nomen* 121 (A Slap from the Lord) about the householder who married the cook after winning the lottery. But this Ulrih Kalms published it as a drama (a real treat!) under the title *Dor groysre trefer* 121 (The Great Fortune Teller), and with such beautiful language that he is welcome to warm himself by Shomer's hearth. The content itself is also very interesting in that all of Ulrih Kalms's heroes drink only coffee. It seems that Ulrih Kalms enjoys coffee, and coffee is the kind of drink that does not spoil..."

"Mr. Defense Counsel," the presiding judge suddenly broke in, "I must ask you to speak to the issue at hand and not wander so far off course!"

"Pardon me! Honored jurors, it should be as clear as day to you that Shomer's novels do contain something of worth, even though the prosecutor absolutely denies it. I can provide you with further proof in the fact that the public reads more of Shomer's novels than Abramovitch's or other similar works. For what reason? Why, I ask you? It is probably not an accident.

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121. I was unable to find the date of this novel. See note 6 for additional information on Bukhbinder.
123. A possible reference to *A gebentshter patsh: a rare ersetzung*, Berdichev, 1887. A novel by the same title as the one cited by Sholem Aleichem above was republished in Warsaw in 1897.
124. Sholem Aleichem is referring here to Kalms's *Dor groysre trefer oder der geymis fun dl 200,000 rubel* (The Great Fortune Teller, or the 200,000 Ruble Windfall, a Yiddish drama in four acts), *Yidishes folkesblat* 6-12 (1888). Sholem Aleichem found the vulgarity of Kalms' 'Yiddish unacceptable.
Perhaps there is something to them. I assert that there is a kind of bond between *Shomer* and his readership, something that makes their feelings coincide with his works. It would appear that *Shomer* understands what the public likes. How can *Shomer* be guilty if the public does not understand? What should *Shomer* do if the masses prefer such fairy tales—full of rogues, vipers, and werewolves? The masses, the ordinary folk, are like small children who cannot fall asleep without such a fairy tale. They adore such stories. They get frightened at the sound of "Boo," and they demand precisely to get frightened!

"*Shomer* understands this very well, and you can see how he acquired great fame as a result. Wherever you happen to be in a Jewish town, drop in on the shop attendant, the servant girl, the artisan, the female cook, the woman who sells fruit... You will hear the delight with which they respond to your inquiries about *Shomer*. Ask the same cooks or fruit-sellers or servants about Abramovitch or Linetski and their mouths will open and their ears will prick up. They will not understand what an Abramovitch or a Linetski even is... So what is the story with them? The story is the following: Abramovitch, Linetski and others like them are writers for the intelligentsia, for the chosen few, for the educated or partly educated classes, whereas *Shomer* is a writer for everyone, a novelist for shopkeepers, servant girls, cooks, coachmen, and women who peddle goods at the market. Yes, honored jurors, for such an audience *Shomer* is a nice writer, a fine bellettrist, just as Moshe Marakhowski from Boslov is a decent poet, and Ulrikh Kalms is a decent playwright who crafts dramas and comedies, and Ozer Bloshteyn and Bekerman, and Khayim Bunim Tsimbler and Fishzon the jester, and all the other hacks are considered major writers by the ordinary folk... I see that the prosecutor is looking at me askance, as if I am offending the masses and casting aspersions on the people. What am I to do? I am also eager for the masses to take up the kinds of Yiddish works that the intellectuals are reading. I also want to see what the scullery maid has to say about Abramovitch, Linetski, and other such authors. I also want to hear what the servant girl has to say about one of Spektor's novels. I also would like to live so long as to experience a time when this audience chases after a real book, seeks out a Jewish newspaper, a journal, understands what a critic is all about and why critics are necessary... Only God knows whether I and the prosecutor and you will live to see such a day. Only God knows whether something will be learned from today's proceedings that are being taken down by our stenographer Sholem Aleichem and will probably be reprinted in a separate pamphlet—God knows whether anyone will know of it!... No, honored jurors, you must not be so severe with my client, because it is not *Shomer* who is guilty for being a *Shomer*. The public is guilty that there is such a thing as a *Shomer*. A certain man of science once said that everything is a product of its time, of its circumstances. Whatever we see, whatever we find in the world must be the way it is; it cannot be otherwise because then
it would not be.... Therefore, we must conclude, we must be reconciled to the fact that writers such as Shomer, Bekerman, Ulrikh Kalms, Moshe Marakhovski from Bosioy, Oyzer Bloshcyn, Khayim Bunim Tsimhler and others must be part of our literature, and the more we persecute them, the more we want to hound them, the more they will breed, be fruitful and multiply, sprout like green grass and grow like toadstools. Let them be, and they will probably cease to exist on their own. Leave the public alone to choose what material it wants to read. The audience, I repeat, is like a little child. It will grow up, it will get smarter. You will not be holding back anyone in the least, and true talents, important writers will not be harmed. God's world is vast. Beautiful nature and human intelligence co-exist with scoundrels and insects, worms and cockroaches, frogs and lice, darkness and plague... and they do not destroy God's world.

"Therefore, honored jurors, I hope that your intelligence and your conscience will not permit you to deal too harshly with my client, Mr. Shomer, who is now in your hands and who begs you to judge him fairly and with compassion, as a man equal to others. I rest my case."

"What is your response?" the presiding justice turned to the prosecutor.

"After such a statement, after such a "defense" presented by my opponent, the counsel for the plaintiff, I have nothing further to add."

This is what the prosecutor said and he sat down.

"The Accused! You may now put in a last word."

Thus the presiding justice turned to Shomer, who rose and began to speak in a trembling voice:

"Honored judges and jurors, I am supposed to react both to the prosecutor as well as to my own lawyer, but my health does not allow it. I will not assert that I am a major belaetrist. But I can tell you that in my place and time I play an important enough role... A new generation has arisen. New Yiddish writers have appeared: educated men who possess a good knowledge of Hebrew and have advanced degrees... All of them have taken to writing in our homey language. It has become the rage to criticize Yiddish works. It was never like this before. Nobody ever said a single bad word about my writing. Just the opposite: I was praised, I was thanked, I was paid—so long as I continued to write novels. Now that a Yiddish newspaper has been established, now that there is criticism, everyone is suddenly concerned with me, everyone is piling on... "Mr. Criticus" is on my case; the "Yidisher gazeten" in the Yidishes foiksblat is against me. Frishman and Sholem

125. Deryydisher gazeten (The Jewish Thief) pseudonym of Yisroel Levi (1842–1905). Levi's St. Petersburg press put out Yidishes foiksblat from 1881–90. Though the
Aleichem are no better inclined towards me. Everyone is getting in on the action. Why me and not others? Because they are jealous of me, they begrudge my success. Honored jurors, in my life I have written close to a hundred novels. It was not easy. The prosecutor says that I adapted them from French. I swear to you, I do not know French! What kind of reward will I live to see from the common people? Long ago I wrote in one of my novels that I will spare them the trouble of erecting me a cast-iron monument after my death. I have toiled so much and in the end they will ruin me. Honored jurors, have pity!"

At this point Shomer's voice broke and a sobbing cry could be heard in the hall. Two scullery maids and a servant girl were crying. The rest of the audience also sat sadly and several among them had red, damp eyes.

"So, honored jurors," the presiding justice said, "now you must go to your deliberation room. You must determine your judgment of our accused, which consists of three possibilities:

1. If you find according to the prosecutor's accusation that Shomer is entirely guilty, you will indicate: "Yes, he is guilty."

2. If you find according to the defense that Shomer is entirely innocent, you will indicate: "Not guilty."

3. And if you determine that Shomer is guilty but with extenuating circumstances, and you want to treat him with mercy, compassion, and pity, you will indicate: "He is guilty, but he deserves leniency."

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paper published some of the best contemporary writers (for instance, Sholem Aleichem, Spektor, and Yankev Dinezon), in Levi's own articles he often defamed Yiddish, to the chagrin of those writers and intellectuals who were struggling to establish respect for it as a competitive literature.

A half-hour later the twelve jurors came back with their verdict: "Yes, he is guilty, but he deserves leniency."

The prosecutor and the defense counsel exchanged a few more words, during which time the prosecutor demanded that Shomer be driven from the literary world and that he be forbidden from writing any more novels for the common people. The defense argued that this was somewhat excessive, that to forbid someone from writing was too harsh, and that the verdict itself was already punishment enough for Shomer.

The presiding judge and the two magistrates rose and left to consider the verdict, and there was a significant commotion and tumult in the hall. People conversed, complained, grumbled. This one said that they were going to send him to hard labor, and that one determined that it smelled more like Siberia. The women spoke more than anyone, all at once, like geese. Several were on Shomer's side, and some on the opposite. Several old maids gazed at Shomer with pity, compassion, and love.

Finally, the presiding judge and the justices came out and read the following decision, consisting of five points:

1. The court determines that Shomer is not truly a Yiddish writer.
2. Following the careful deliberation of twelve individuals whose responsibility it was to judge him, we proclaim that Shomer is not a belletrist, a poet, an artist, a moralist, a philosopher, a satirist, or an aesthete.
3. Every new work that is published by Shomer immediately must be submitted to the critics who will go over it in great detail.
4. A request that Shomer should have compassion on our poor Yiddish language and should, at the very least, refrain from reprinting any of his old rags, so that his "most interesting" novels should go off to the same place where our beloved holy Sabbath goes at sunset.
5. This verdict, which is being copied word for word by our stenographer Sholem Aleichem, should be printed quickly and without delay in several thousand copies and distributed among Yiddish readers at the cheapest possible price.