

# Judging *The Judgment of Shomer* Jewish Literature versus Jewish Reading

Arguing  
the Modern  
Jewish Canon

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When Nahum-Meir Shaykevitch, better known as Shomer,<sup>1</sup> 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<sup>2</sup> 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

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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 Shaykevitch'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 200 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 come-uppance. 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, 2004), 243.
2. Sholem Aleichem (1859–1916), the pen name of Sholem Rabinovitch, first published Yiddish fiction in 1883 in the newspaper *Yudishes folksblat*. 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. Abramovitsh, whom he recognized as the "grandfather" of modern Yiddish literature.<sup>3</sup> This juxtaposition of Shomer and Abramovitsh 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-literatur*), 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 *Yudishes 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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3. Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (Syracuse University Press, 1996), 27–30.

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 tshuve, oder der falsher 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.<sup>4</sup> 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*,<sup>5</sup> 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?”<sup>6</sup>

Several months after the publication of Dubnov’s *Voskhod* review, the controversy spilled over to the *Yudishes 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 *Yudishes 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-

4. Shmuel Niger, “Shomers mishpet—af Sholem Aleykhemen,” *Di tsukunft* (February 1947), 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.

5. See Letter III of “Mihtavim al davar ha-sifrut,” *Hayom*, 257–258 (1887), 2–3; 2–4.

6. Criticus, “Literaturnaia Letopis” (Literary Chronicles: The Poverty of Contemporary Jewish Belles-Lettres), *Voskhod* (May 1887). Portions of Dubnov’s argument were translated from Russian into Yiddish and published in *Yudishes folksblat* 27–28 (1887).

tals 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 oeuvre includes many realistic descriptions of Jewish life and whose critics attack him out of jealousy for his success.<sup>7</sup> The paper’s editor, Alexander Tsederboym, wedged Y.M. Volfson’s sharp critique of Shomer’s novel *Der shlimazldiker hoz* (1886)<sup>8</sup> 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...”<sup>9</sup> 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 Volfson’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.<sup>10</sup> 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].”<sup>11</sup>

7. Sh. Berdichevski, “Erinerungen un gedanken vegn ertsung un literatur,” *Yudishes folksblat* 1 (1887), 3–9; 3 (1887), 35–38.

8. Y.M. Volfson, “Der shlimazldiker hoz,” *Yudishes folksblat* 2 (1887), 24–26.

9. Quoted in Z. Reyzin, “Shomer,” *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese un filologie*, vol. 4 (Vilna: Kletskin, 1929), 778.

10. Shomer, “Korespondentsies: A briv tsu der redaktsie,” *Yudishes folksblat* 10 (1887), 150–151.

11. Shomer, *Yehi or: a literarishe kampf* (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 *Yudishes 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 *Der yudisher 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.<sup>12</sup> 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'ar yisrael*'—the Jewish people is still naïve"). 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."<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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"<sup>15</sup> Sholem Aleichem, who was trying to make a repu-

12. *Der yudisher gazlen*, "Kritik," *Yudishes folksblat* 27 (1887), 419–422; 28 (1887), 435–440.

13. "A patsh far a patsh," *Yudishes folksblat* 30 (1887), 483–488.

14. *Yehi or*, 2–3. See also *Der yudisher gazlen*, "Der yudisher gazlen iz esh-halev," *Yudishes folksblat* 34 (1887), 563–568.

15. *Yehi or*, 4.

tation for himself at Shomer's expense, and especially by the paper's unfairness in publishing anonymous reviews.<sup>16</sup> 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 ober men zol khotsh kenen lezen a halbe shtunde un nit genetsin." ("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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> It was a gesture that enabled him to masquerade as someone who

16. For a sense of the exchange, see Pri ets ha-hayim (Y.M. Volfson), "Kritik af kritik," *Yudishes folksblat* 32 (1887), 541–542; Sholem Aleichem, "Fun vayte medines," *Yudishes folksblat* 33 (1887), 547–552; Rav-katsin (Y.Kh. Ravnitski), "An eysek mit shmates," *Yudishes folksblat*, supplement to issue 4 (1888), 13–15; 5 (1888), 32–33; Anonymous, "Retsenzie," *Yudishes folksblat*, supplement to issues 11–12 (1888), 355–361; Eyner fun di mitarbeter, "Retsenzie: Di goldene kelber," *Yudishes folksblat* 16 (1888), 455–467. 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.

17. Shomer, *Der letster yudisher kenig: a historisher roman* (Vilna, 1888).

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 alongside 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.<sup>19</sup> 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 *Yudishes folksblat* in 1884):

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.<sup>20</sup>

This passage anticipates the kind of arguments Sholem Aleichem refined a few years later in *The Judgment of Shomer*, establishing that, from his ten-

19. Ironically, it was an exorcism that kept the ghost alive. The continued strength of the market for lowbrow fiction, especially in the interwar period in the Yiddish press, suggests that although Sholem Aleichem forged a reputation off the struggle against Shomer, he lost the larger battle to reform mass reading habits and tastes. See Chone Shmeruk, "Letoldot sifrut ha-'shund' be-Yiddish," *Tarbitz* 52 (1983), 325-354.

20. Quoted in Shmeruk, 343. Charles Paul de Kock (1793-1871) was a disseminator of lowbrow French sentimental novels.

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.<sup>21</sup> As he wrote to his friend and fellow writer Y.H. 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."<sup>22</sup> Sholem Aleichem's rhetoric here speaks of evisceration, 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 yudishe folksbibliotek* (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 anti-realist 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 Esbikher, he showed that of the seventy-eight Yiddish books published between 1887 and 1888, almost 40% were penned by Shomer and his imitators, whereas only one was penned by S.Y. Abramovitsh, 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. Abramovitsh. 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 Esbikher, "A reyster iber ale zhargonishe bikher vos zenen opgedrukt gevorn inem yor TRM"Kh [1887/1888]," *Di yudishe folksbibliotek* 1 (1888), 469–473; see also the list published for 1888/1889 in *Di yudishe folksbibliotek* 2 (1889), 135–139.

22. Letter from Sholem Aleichem to Y.H. Ravnitski, 20 February 1888 in *Briv fun Sholem-Aleykhem*, ed. Abraham Lis (Perets farlag, 1995), 178.



them.<sup>23</sup> 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)<sup>24</sup> in *The Judgment of Shomer* (he refers to Shomer's writing in the document as *mist*, 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 delves 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 le-or *Shomers mishpet* le-Sholem Aleichem," *Hulyot* 5 (1999), 109–159.

24. Chone Shmeruk 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. Shmeruk 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 Shmeruk, 325–354.

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-literatur* that could bridge the gap between the intellectuals and a potential mass readership by attracting both groups to the same vernacular texts.<sup>25</sup> 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, school-boys." 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 Goldfaden. "[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 filth 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 or her lips." (Quint, 62) In recalling the reading habits of his town in his memoir *Parmetn* (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," *AJS Review* 29:1 (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 *daytshmerish* (an inflated use of Germanisms in literary Yiddish)<sup>26</sup>—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 feign prudishness as a means of undermining the false propriety in Shomer's happy endings.<sup>27</sup>

26. *Daytshmerish*, 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 Mordkhe Schaechter, "The 'Hidden Standard': A Study of Competing Influences in Standardization," *The Field of Yiddish* 3 (Mouton & Co., 1969), 284.

27. At times, Sholem Aleichem's own readings in *The Judgment* strain credulity. 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 *Yudishes folks-blatt*, 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 them 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 packed 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...<sup>28</sup>

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 *Paltiel Ox*, 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* (1846), 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.

28. *Sender blank un zayn gezindl: A roman on a roman* (composed in 1887, published in 1888 under the title *Reb Sender Blank un zayn fulgeshetste familie: a roman on a libe in Ale verk fun Sholem Aleykhem* 21 (Sholem Aleykhem folksfond, 1925), 94-95.

ing the conventions of the Yiddish popular novel. The passage opens ironically, with self-deprecation bordering on self-emasculation 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 sentimental novels, but recognizes that 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), performing 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 fare 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?<sup>29</sup>

29. Sholem Aleichem, *Stempenyu*, trans. Hannah Berman (Methuen and Co., 1913), 275. 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 everyday 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. Abramovitsh. A short time earlier, Sholem Aleichem had recognized Abramovitsh as the “grandfather” of modern Yiddish fiction. He saw Abramovitsh as a consummate stylist, one whose stories were rooted in the economic and social realities of everyday Eastern European Jewish life. The celebration of Abramovitsh’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.”<sup>30</sup> These Russian-Jewish intel-

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kisses, little skiffs 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 all the same in his poisonous trade?” (146) 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 affectations, and pictures of happiness...they miss, it seems to me, the true end of art.” (97) Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Eleanore 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.

30. According to Olga Litvak, the celebratory essays in 1884 emphasized Abramovitsh’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 Binshtok shows how Abramovitsh had a hand in managing his own myth as a national writer who functions as “a new kind of folk hero...a maskil 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 Abramovitsh, and to embrace the people's vernacular as a language worthy of creative expression.

On 28 June, 1888, Abramovitsh 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."<sup>31</sup> 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 Abramovitsh'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<sup>32</sup>). His response to Abramovitsh'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.<sup>33</sup>

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."<sup>34</sup> 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 demoting 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 idisher roman* (Sholem-Aleykhem folksfond oysgabe, 1925), 123.

34. *Stempenyu*, trans. Hannah Berman (Methuen and Co., 1913), 5, 7.

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 *Stempenyu* appeared: a supplement to Sholem Aleichem's own new anthology of Yiddish literature *Di yudishe folks-bibliotek: a bukh far literatur, kritik un visnshaft* (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 Abramovitsh's *Dos vintshfingerl* (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 *Stempenyu* (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.<sup>35</sup> 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

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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 Solevey*, which, like *Stempenyu* 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 paled in comparison to the lowbrow Yiddish romances that continued to flood the market.<sup>36</sup>

Much of Sholem Aleichem's thinking about this new aesthetic standard crystallized in his essay "A Letter to a Close Friend,"<sup>37</sup> 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 nishtano?* 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...<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup>

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

36. Alyssa Quint observes that in 1888, 3,200 issues of *Di yudishe 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 Quint, 81.

37. "A briv tsu a gutn fraynt," *Di yudishe folks-bibliotek* 2 (Kiev, 1889), 304-310. This work should be read in conjunction with his short pamphlet *Der yidisher dales in di beste verk fun undzere folks-shriftshetler* (Jewish Poverty in the Best Works of Our National Writers) (St. Petersburg, 1888) in which he holds up Abramovitsh's *Fishke the Lame* 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.

38. "A briv," 304.

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 Solevey* 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 Solevey 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...<sup>40</sup>

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.<sup>41</sup> 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

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39. Ibid., 305.

40. Ibid., 306–307.

41. For more on this, see Anita Norich, "Portraits of the Artist in Three Novels by Sholem Aleichem," *Prooftexts* 4:3 (1984), 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,”<sup>42</sup> 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.”<sup>43</sup> 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 shmerkes dertseylung” 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 mentshnfraynd* (issues 28–48), the paper he founded soon after his arrival

42. “A briv,” 308.

43. Z. Reyzin, “Shomer,” *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese, un filologye*, vol. 4 (Vilna: Kletskin, 1929), 783.

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.<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup> 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 *Kindershpiln* and *Sender Blankn*, 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...”<sup>46</sup> 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...”<sup>47</sup>

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44. Shmuel Niger, “Shomers mishpet—af Sholem Aleykhemen,” *Di tsukunft* (April 1947), 233.
45. In summarizing the articles from *Der mentshfraynd*, 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 *Stempenyu* would have ended with more drama. Rokhele’s strong attraction to Stempenyu should have triumphed over her modesty, prompting her to run away with him and break down class distinctions. Or she ought to have suffered so much in realizing that Stempenyu 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 pruv aruntersuraysn Sholem-Aleykhems romanen,” *Morgn frayheyt* (February 12, 1939), 3, 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 royte velt* (August 1929), 126.
47. Veviorke, “Shomer un Shomerizm,” 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:

*Ani ha-gever*, 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 snots toss stones at me. And nobody intervened [on my behalf]. Just the opposite—many applauded “Bravo.”<sup>48</sup>

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 (*folksbine*) in which Shomer’s son, Avrom, defended his father against playwrights Leon Kobrin and Jacob Gordon, 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.<sup>49</sup> The pamphlet’s title appeals both to a divine

48. The article appeared in *Land khokhem* 10 (July 1894). See Reyzin, *Leksikon*, 783–784.

49. 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, “Nokhem-Meyer Shaykevitsch: Another Classic of Yiddish Theater,” *Studies in Jewish Civilization* 16 (2005), 203–216; Roze Shomer-Batshelis, *Undzer foter Shomer* (Ikuf, 1950), 85–94, 159–161, 167–168. Z. Reyzin’s bibliography at the end of Shomer-Batshelis’ 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”<sup>50</sup> and the “dishonest means they employ to tarnish me”<sup>51</sup>—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.”<sup>52</sup> 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] *Stempenyu* and *Yosele Solevey* admit.<sup>53</sup>

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.<sup>54</sup>

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 for 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.<sup>55</sup> In his mind, he

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50. *Yehi or*, 1.

51. *Ibid.*, 28.

52. *Ibid.*, 4.

53. *Ibid.*, 4. Shomer repeats the claim again on page 23.

54. He cites letters by editors of *Yudishes 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 leads 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 taming 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”<sup>56</sup>), and take leave of the controversy with a self-righteous “pure conscience.”<sup>57</sup> 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 *shund* 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,<sup>58</sup> the Soviet, and the modernist.

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ing, and Shomer resented the intervention: “The critics make fun of the fact that in one of my novels I wrote that the novel contains everything that the reader loves and that many other writers praise the name Shomer and even borrow it [to sell their own works]....Frishman (aka Sholem Aleichem) considers this a sin and compares it to peddlers hawking their wares. But all writers, even the holy rabbis, write introductions with the goal of enticing readers to read their works. Authors from other peoples do even better; when they publish a book they take out advertisements in the newspapers....But when Shomer praises himself with a few words in one of his forwards it is considered a heavenly transgression.” (Ibid., 14) In truth, Sholem Aleichem was only slightly more subtle in his own self-referentiality.

56. 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 (1836–1913), 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:

<p>Vu iz zayn getlekher gayst nit gefloygn? In Bavl, Mitsrayim geven, in Shpanye gekukt mit di gaystike oygn, geschildert undz alts mit zayn pen.</p>	<p>Where did your sacred spirit not soar? Your heavenly eyes roamed From Babylon and Egypt to Spain, Your pen described everything for us.</p>
<p>Levi, Ben-Ezre, un Hurduses palats Zahare un kaltn Sibir, harems fun sultans, hayzer fun dales fotografirt af papir.<sup>59</sup></p>	<p>Levi, Ben Ezra, and Herod's palace, Sahara and frigid Siberia, Sultans' harems, impoverished homes All photographed on paper.</p>

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 elite 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."<sup>60</sup> 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<sup>61</sup> signaled a move on the part of some inter-

59. Eliyokim Tsunzer, "Shomer," reprinted in Shomer-Batshelis, *Undzer foter Shomer*, 193.

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..."<sup>62</sup> 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."<sup>63</sup> Y.Y. Sigal went even further, suggesting "that Shomer was the one who gathered the audience which later became Sholem Aleichem's."<sup>64</sup>

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."<sup>65</sup>

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

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tion of Sholem Aleichem's early canonizing efforts and the effacement of tensions between mass and elite tastes in understanding the development of Yiddish fiction. For instance, A.A. Roback's *The Story of Yiddish Literature* (1940) dedicates a few paragraphs (in a book of over 400 pages) to Shomer's contribution to the emergence of Yiddish fiction; Charles Madison's *Yiddish Literature: Its Scope and Major Writers* (New York 1968) mentions Shomer in passing on three separate occasions in a work of more than 500 pages. Though Sol Liptzin's *A History of Yiddish Literature* (Jonathan David, 1972) includes a little more than a page out of more than 500 about Shomer, his history at least provides the reader with an understanding of why his "entertaining" fiction "aroused the wrath of intellectuals," suggesting to readers that a history of Yiddish reading would look very different from his study of canonical Yiddish writers (53-54).

62. Shmuel Niger, "Shomer," *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, vol. 8 (New York: Alveltlekhn kultur-kongres, 1981), 744.
63. Kalmen Marmor, *Morgn frayheyt* (New York, December 20, 1923). Quoted by Shmuel Niger, "Shomers mishpet—af Sholem Aleykhemen: a kapitl yidishe kultur geshikhte," *Di tsukunft* (January 1947), 46.
64. *Kanade odler* (Montreal, November 9, 1930). Quoted by Niger, *Di tsukunft* (January 1947), 44.
65. Quoted in Sophie Grace Pollack, "Hashpaato shel Shomer al korei Yiddish," *Hulyot* 10 (2006), 71, 73.

peddler who went house to house, like a beggar, to sell Yiddish chap-books....These books...were the most beloved in our home. The first book I had the energy to read was by Shomer, *Der raykher betler*,....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 raykher betler* 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 naïve. 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.<sup>66</sup>

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.<sup>67</sup>

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."<sup>68</sup> 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

66. Avrom Reyzin, "Tsum 25stn yortsayt fun Shomer," *Forverts* (New York, December 6, 1930); reprinted in Shomer-Batshelis, *Undzer foter shomer*, 199–205.

67. According to Pollack, the noted Israeli literary scholar Dov Sadan admitted in a private letter from the 1950s that he read all of Shomer in his youth. "Hashpaato," 74. See also Sadan's brief introduction to *Shirei Shomer ve'zikhronotav*, ed. Roze Shomer-Batshelis (Jerusalem: Ahiasaf, 1952), 7–8.

68. Y.L. Peretz, "Di lezerin," *Ale verk* II (New York, CYCO, 1947), 108.

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,"<sup>69</sup> 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,"<sup>70</sup> 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 Haskalah and earned their reputations by mocking the deficiencies of Jewish life—was at least sympathetic to Jews in his writing.<sup>71</sup>

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."<sup>72</sup> 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.<sup>73</sup>

69. *Morgn zhurnal* (May 24, 1930). Quoted by Niger, *Di tsukunft* (January 1947), 43.

70. Z. Reyzin, *Leksikon*, 770.

71. See Gershom Bader, "A nayer vikuekh vegn Shomer," *Yidishe togblat* (New York, February 29, 1929); republished in Shomer-Batshelis, 228–231.

72. *Morgn frayhayt* (December 20, 1923); quoted by Niger, *Di tsukunft* (January 1947), 46.

73. Shaul Ginzberg, "Shomer un zayne kritikers," *Di tsukunft* (November 1940); reprinted in Shomer-Batshelis, 219.

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, *Literarische 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.”<sup>74</sup>

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 diet of most contemporary readers—was of serious concern to critics and intellectuals, who traced such works to Shomer's transgressions.<sup>75</sup>

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. Abramovitsh'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 *klipa* (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,” “Natashe,” and “Kinder shpil,” in which one could find the stain of sentimentality.<sup>76</sup>

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

74. Yisroel Shtern, “Unzer lezerin oder Shomer hot gevunen,” *Literarische bleter* 4 (April 8, 1927), 265–268.

75. For more on this, see Shmeruk, 325–354.

76. Shmuel Niger, *Geklibene verk* 3 (New York: Yidisher kultur farlag, 1928), 20–29.

career of a fellow writer.<sup>77</sup> 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 Spector’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.<sup>78</sup> 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 *shund* 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, *shund* 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.<sup>79</sup>

By the time Niger returned to the question of Shomer in a series of three articles in *Di tsukunft* (1947),<sup>80</sup> 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.”<sup>81</sup> 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 dominance over the market that he had enjoyed in Russia.

78. Reyzin, “Shomer un zayne romanen” *Forverts* (N.Y., November 17, 1940), republished in Shomer-Batshelis, 210.

79. Shmeruk, 335.

80. Niger, “Shomers mishpet – af Sholem Aleykhemen,” *Di tsukunft* 1 (January 1947), 41–47; 2 (Feb. 1947), 111–116; 4 (April 1947), 232–236.

81. Parush, *Reading Jewish Women*, 154.

Shomer launched against them.”<sup>82</sup> 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...”<sup>83</sup> 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.”<sup>84</sup> 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 Veviorke (both of whom we shall discuss below), and the Yiddishists Zalmen Reyzin and Kalmen Marmor. He sarcastically concluded that “those who are knocking for a revision are banging on an open door.”<sup>85</sup>

A few years later, in response to the publication of *Undzer foter Shomer* (Our father Shomer, 1950)—a biography and collection of sympathetic essays edited by Shomer’s daughter Roze Shomer-Batshelis—Niger conceded yet again that “of course, if [Shomer] had not been so popular, his critics would not have so fiercely opposed him.”<sup>86</sup> 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...”<sup>87</sup> 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].”<sup>88</sup> Niger was reacting to what he considered to be overblown revisionist claims by Shomer’s daughter, such as “before he [my

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 Ginzberg’s article that appeared in *Di tsukunft* (November 1940).

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

86. Niger, “A naye revizye fun Shomers mishpet,” *Idisher Kempfer* (March 23, 1956), 34.

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

88. Niger, “A naye revizye,” 33, 35.

father] started writing, there was no such thing as the Yiddish ‘reading masses.’”<sup>89</sup> Niger responded in frustration: “It is not true that there were no readers before him. [Yankev] Dinezon’s second novel *Der shvartser yungermantshik* 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.”<sup>90</sup>

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”<sup>91</sup> 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”<sup>92</sup> 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-Batshelis, *Undzer foter shomer*, 62.

90. Niger, “A naye revizye,” 35. Iris Parush distinguishes between the “old reading women”—consumers of traditional Yiddish texts to whom Dik’s *mayse bikhlekh* (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.

91. Iris Parush, “The Whole Trouble is the Fault of the Little Story Books: Women Who Read Yiddish,” *Reading Jewish Women*, 242.

92. Parush, 241.

*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).<sup>93</sup> 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!"<sup>94</sup> 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."<sup>95</sup> 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."<sup>96</sup> 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 swindler...sooner or later gets his 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."<sup>97</sup> 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-

93. A. Veviorke, "Shomer un Shomerizm," *Di royte velt* (August 1929), 108–120; "Shomer un Sholem Aleykhem," *Di royte velt* (October 1929), 123–128; *Revizye* (Kharkov-Kiev: Literatur un kunst, 1931).

94. *Revizye*, 7–8.

95. "Shomer un Sholem Aleykhem," 138.

96. "Shomer un Shomerizm," 115.

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 *shtetl* 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 Yehupetses [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.<sup>98</sup>

Veviorke here probes the link between the development of Yiddish proletarian literature and *shund*. He sees Shomer as a critical “transfer station” for nineteenth-century Yiddish literature whose “rails lead to proletarian literature in one direction and to petit-bourgeois literature in the other.”<sup>99</sup> 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.”<sup>100</sup> Veviorke explains: “[since] Shomer was the liberator of the masses from the Jewish plutocracy and the rabbis,”<sup>101</sup> “the householders, who saw it as their duty to protect the Jewish vineyard, wanted to annihilate his influence and trumped up a trial against him.”<sup>102</sup> 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.<sup>103</sup>

98. “Shomer un Sholem Aleykhem,” 129.

99. *Revizye*, 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 kleynbirglekhn kheyrem” (Away with the Petit-Bourgeois Ban), 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 *shund*....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 *Emes* 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*,<sup>104</sup> Viner asks: "Is Shomer really a writer whose rehabilitation ought to be connected to the demands of great Bolshevik art?"<sup>105</sup> 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 addicted the working class to an escapist brand of pulp fiction that promoted the lowest aesthetic standard of "*shmireray*" (scribbling)<sup>106</sup> 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."<sup>107</sup> 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."<sup>108</sup> 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 thievery from other sources and "trashy [*shundish*]

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heard from the people, funny and tragic stories [about the abuses of the rich]." ("Shomer un shomerizm," 109, 110) 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 shomerizm," 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.

104. Meir Viner, "Far marksistisher revizye—kegn kleynbirglekhe legendes (Pre-Marxist Revisions—Against Petit-Bourgeois Legends)," *Emes* (February 2, 1932), 2; (February 5, 1932), 4; "Materialn tsu A. Veviorke's Shomer-legende (Materials on A. Veviorke's Shomer Legend," in *Problemes fun kritik*, ed. M. Viner and A. Gurshteyn (Moscow: Emes, 1933).
105. *Emes* (February 2, 1932), 2.
106. "Vegn Kh. Veviorke's *Revizye* (About Comrade Veviorke's *Revision*)," *Farn lenishn etap in der literatur-kritik* (Kiev: Notes from a Plenary of the Literary Section, 1932), 47.
107. "Materialn," 240.
108. "Vegn Kh. Veviorke's *Revizye*," 49.

attempts to polish palaces of fantasy.”<sup>109</sup> Viner rejects Veviorke’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”<sup>110</sup>) 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.”<sup>111</sup> The dispute between Veviorke 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 Glatshiteyn in his poem “Shomer”<sup>112</sup> (1930) and in his essay “Unzer elter feter Shomer” (Our Great Uncle Shomer).<sup>113</sup> That these works appeared on the anniversaries of Shomer’s death suggests that Glatshiteyn imagined them as revisionist interventions designed to shift the terms of critical discourse about Shomer.

“Shomer” was composed in the same period as another Glatshiteyn poem of literary homage, “Moyshe leybs kol,”<sup>114</sup> dedicated to the memory of the modernist troubadour Moyshe Leyb Halpern. Though Glatshiteyn is interested in exploring creative debts in both, the focus of “Moyshe leybs kol” was on the creative personality of Halpern, whereas “Shomer” was more concerned with exploring the bond between its subject and his readers. What did a leading modernist poet of interwar New York have in common with

109. “Materialn,” 261.

110. *Ibid.*, 236.

111. *Ibid.*, 262.

112. Yankev Glatshiteyn, “Shomer,” *Undzer bukh 4:4* (October 1930), 97–99; republished in *Inzikh* (1934), *Yidishtaytshn* (Warsaw: Brzoza, 1937), 70–72, and *Fun mayn gantser mi* (New York, 1956), 278–279. References to the poem are from the version published in *Yidishtaytshn*. For more on the poem, see readings by Janet Hadda, *Yankev Glatshiteyn* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 54–56 and Avrom Noverstern, “In di videranandn fun yidishn modernizm,” *Yivo bleter* 1 (1991), 199–248.

113. “Unzer elter feter Shomer,” *Morgn zhurnal* (24 November 1940); republished in Glatshiteyn’s *Prost un poshet* (New York, 1978), 130–134 and in Shomer-Batshelis, *Undzer foter Shomer*, 223–227. All citations here are from the reprint of the article in *Prost un poshet*.

114. See *Fun mayn gantser 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 Glatshsteyn'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 shtikl mer...") and the overly sentimentalized atmosphere it creates.<sup>115</sup> 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? Glatshsteyn 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 Glatshsteyn 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.<sup>116</sup> The poet-

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115. Novershtern disputes Janet Hadda's suggestion that Glatshsteyn's poem was an intervention into the aforementioned dispute between Veviorke and Viner. Though Veviorke's articles about Shomer in *Di royte velt* (1929) may have influenced Glatshsteyn, "Shomer" was composed before the debate between the Soviet critics was published. Rather, Novershtern posits that Glatshsteyn may have been provoked more by Veviorke's harsh criticism of his own *Inzikh* (Introspectivist) modernist poetic group. By calling attention in the poem to Shomer's inflated diction and his fantastic plots, Glatshsteyn argues that *Inzikh* is the inheritor of this interest in language play and resistance to realism. See Novershtern, 247-248 (n35).

116. As early as Glatshsteyn'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 postvernacular 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 Glatshiteyn 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 durkhgeshunde vet 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, Glatshiteyn 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 Glatshiteyn’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, Glatshiteyn evokes and then expands the borders of the family constellation set up by Sholem Aleichem when he proclaimed Abramovitsh 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, Glatshiteyn portrays Shomer as an influence (conscious or not) on all later Yiddish writers. In this, Glatshiteyn 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.”<sup>117</sup> Ultimately what this suggests is that it is necessary to break free from the established reading of canons by offering counter-canons. Glatshiteyn’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 Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem) that Yiddish literature represent Jewish reality:

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Holocaust, Yiddish writers were self-consciously obsessed with the fate of the language.

117. Cited by V. Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine* (The Hague, 1965), 260.

Like you, I wanted to flee from *Fishke the Lame*.  
 You, conjuror, 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-pure heart of your hero...

Glatshsteyn 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 Abramovitsh's *Fishke 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 chapbooks. 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 escapist 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 Glatshsteyn's modernism is a direct descendant.

As the poem eventually reveals, the speaker's concern about the relevance of the Yiddish writer in America is symbiotically related to the disappearance of the Yiddish reader, "our dead inheritance." If Shomer was responsible, as some critics have suggested, for the creation of a mass readership, then his excision 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 culture as the children of these immigrants adjusted to their condition as

English-speaking Americans. For Glatshiteyn, 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 potboilers on the Sabbath, her granddaughters in America no longer need Shomer because in America they were free to act upon their amorous desires: "Ober dayne dinstmeydn zenen shoy'n mer nisht umgliklekh / - zey hobn gehey-ratetet - / un zeyere tekhter varelibn zikh oyf griltsndikn english in di oytomobiln." (But your servant-girls are no longer unhappy -/ they married up - / and their daughters practice true love in grating English in automobiles.) Glatshiteyn passes moral judgment through his diction. He invents the ironic verb "varelibn 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). Glatshiteyn 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 "khasene gehat" with the Germanism "gehey-ratetet" 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 displaced Yiddish as the new jargon of an American Jewish life, which privileges self-gratification over self-refinement, individualism over community. Glatshiteyn 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). Glatshiteyn 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 Glatshiteyn'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 Glatshiteyn 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 *Proletpen* (“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,<sup>118</sup> 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 Glatshiteyn 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 eynuneyntsiker / yidisher naiver 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 Glatshiteyn used Shomer to prompt a reconsideration of distinctions between high and low. Was it Glatshiteyn’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 Jewishness, it might just realize the happy endings that Shomer had once dangled before Yiddish readers?

By posthumously inviting Shomer into the modernist fold, Glatshiteyn legitimates Shomer’s precedent of inventing fantastic scenarios without any concern for social mimesis in his writing. Shomer’s resistance to transforming his art into a vehicle for discussing the politics of his age was a model that the modernists of Glatshiteyn’s generation appropriated for themselves. Having avoided the constraints of ideology and the realities of contemporary society in his writing, Glatshiteyn shows himself to be a kindred spirit with Shomer in so far as both resisted politics and literary realism from opposite ends of the high-low continuum. Glatshiteyn’s counter-narrative of Yiddish literary history opens with the sentimentalist Shomer and concludes with his great-nephew, the Yiddish modernist poet in New York.

Shklovsky’s uncle-nephew theory, first adopted in the ode “Shomer,” was so provocative to Glatshiteyn that he expanded on it in the essay “Our Great Uncle Shomer” (1940). His argument begins with a meditation on the ways in which time is an even greater judge than human beings in its ability to heal old wounds, imagining that Sholem Aleichem and Shomer probably

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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. Glatshyteyn’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,” Glatshyteyn 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, Glatshyteyn 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.”<sup>119</sup> Like other critics before him, Glatshyteyn 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.”<sup>120</sup> By calling attention to the relationship between gender and readership, Glatshyteyn 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.

119. “Unzer elter feter Shomer,” *Prost un poshet*, 131.

120. Ibid. Niger, who was at the forefront of those resisting rehabilitation of Shomer, sharply contested Glatshyteyn’s conclusions about Shomer and the creation of the female reader: “From a historical standpoint, this is simply incorrect. [I.M.] 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 Glatshyteyn’s belief that Yiddish literature owes Shomer a debt is misguided. “The same thing was said by Leyeles. 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 snobbism. It contains within it a kind of literary slumming.” Niger, “Shomers mishpet—af Sholem Aleykhemen,” *Di tsukunft* (January 1947), 43.

Glatshiteyn 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). Glatshiteyn’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?”<sup>121</sup> 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, Glatshiteyn—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 Glatshiteyn, 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 sat 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.”<sup>122</sup> 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 Glatshiteyn 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.<sup>123</sup>

121. “Unzer elter feter Shomer,” 134.

122. *Ibid.*, 134.

123. Of course, Glatshiteyn 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 Glatshiteyn’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.

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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,<sup>124</sup> 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.<sup>125</sup> 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.

125. Wisse has suggested elsewhere that argument is a central organizing feature of modern Jewish texts. See "Two Jews Talking: A View of Modern Yiddish Literature," *Prooftexts* (January 1984): 35–48.

