A Dragon, a Giant, and a Dwarf Walk into a Forest: The Quest for Fantastic Elements in Yiddish Arthuriana

[Intro]

The day before I started writing this talk, I worked on revisions for an article. One sentence concerning a giant being killed by the Arthurian knight confused the reviewer. When I looked at it, I realized my mistake. I didn't mean "giant" but "dragon". A dragon was killed and this made the mother of a giant grateful. I accidently had typed "giant" instead of dragon. In my head, the fantastic creatures of the Yiddish Arthurian romance *Viduvilt* had all formed one big box in which giants, dragons, and dwarves resided.

[Overview/ Summary, History]

Although it's not the only Arthurian romance adapted for a Jewish audience in medieval Europe, Viduvilt represents the only knight whose story is widely spread in Old Yiddish, setting a more than 400-year-long adaptation tradition in motion. Yet the date, location, and authorial identity of the earliest *Viduvilt* manuscript remain all unknown. The three preserved 16th-century manuscripts seem to have been produced in Italy, where Yiddish literature had its first heyday (Dreeßen 1994: 85; Jaeger 2000: 29).[1] *Viduvilt* is based directly or indirectly on the Middle High German (MHG) *Wigalois* by Wirnt von Grafenberg (dates unknown; active early 13th ct.), in itself the result of a direct or indirect engagement with the Old French text *Le Bel Inconnu* (between c. 1191–1213) by Renaut de Beaujeu. Though not the most famous Arthurian knight, Viduvilt/ Wigalois comes with pedigree; his father is none other than Gawein (Yiddish: Gabein), adventurous Arthurian knight and infamous breaker of hearts.

The MHG *Wigalois* proved incredibly successful with medieval and late medieval audiences. More than 28 fragments and 13 complete medieval manuscripts are preserved (Wennerhold 2005: 76/77, 80), followed by a variety of printed early modern adaptations in prose and verse[2] and a mural series in a castle in Southern Tirol. But, in the early 17th century,

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[1] Erika Timm refers to this period as the first golden age of Yiddish literature (1991: 61).

[2] Ulrich Füetrer, ed., "Wigoleis," in *Buch der Abenteuer der Ritter von der Tafelrunde*, (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, CGM 1,. 75 r.-83r., 1473–1481); Sigmund Feyerabend, ed., "Ritterliche History des Hochberühmpten und Thewren Ritters Herrn Wigoleis vom Rade…," in *Buch der Liebe* (Frankfurt, 1587), 382–396. The first pages of the 1483/1493 print are missing and therewith the title. The full title of the second, most popular edition is *Ein gar*

audiences in German-speaking lands lost interest in stories about Wigalois, Gawein and King Arthur. In fact, *Wigalois* was not rediscovered until the late 18th century, and then through its German prose adaptations.[3]

In contrast to Wirnt's *Wigalois*, the Yiddish version of the story, entitled *Viduvilt*, inspired adaptations throughout the early modern and modern period among Yiddish and non-Yiddish speakers until the 19th century. By the means of a 17th century transcription, the Yiddish tradition reached a large German-speaking audience, unfamiliar with Yiddish, and inspired adaptors who themselves re-envisioned the text for modern audiences.

The story aligns in most adaptations – except for the 18th-century text concerning the Chinese emperor that I distributed in context of this symposium. The Arthurian knight Viduvilt sets out to free a kingdom under threat from a giant usurper and his mother. A giant and her offspring – all of which are eventually killed by Viduvilt – represent a second core-threat to the story world. After the successful completion of the quest, Viduvilt marries the heir of the now-liberated country, and they live happily ever after.

It was the dragon and even more so the family of giants who confused, intrigued and occupied adaptors, critics, and scholars alike. The engagement with dragon, giant and a dwarf - with the latter being more of a side-character - often took place within the context of genre questions and a discourse on the religious-cultural background of the text.

[Wagenseil]

In 1699, these three fantastic elements led the protestant theologian and Yiddish philologist Johann Christoph Wagenseil to allegedly re-construct the heritage of the material. Wagenseil describes to the reader the existence of national-cultural traditions to explain the origin of these fantastic figures. There is, on the one hand, the English Arthuriana which he describes as a somewhat historiographic genre about King Arthur and his deeds. On the other hand, there are German heroic epics, telling mostly stories about warriors in the time of Charlemagne, fighting against Muslim armies. It is important to know that while we know that dwarfs, giants, and dragons were featured in both of these traditions, for Wagenseil, Arthurian material lacked these

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schöne liepliche und kurtzweilige History Von dem Edelen herren Wigoleis vom Rade. Ein Ritter von der Tafelronde. Mit seinen schönen hystorien und figuren/ Wie er geborn/ vnnd sein leben von seiner jugent an Biß an sein ende gefürt vnnd vollbracht hat. Edited by Johann Knoblauch, 2nd ed. Straßburg 1519

[3] The first notable case is the inclusion the Early New High German *Wigoleis vom Rade* in Reichard's Bibliothek der Romane (1778).

elements. In a surprising twist, Wagenseil explains that it was the Yiddish-speaking Jews, somehow familiar with the German heroic epic, the ones who took the English Arthuriana featuring Viduvilt and turned the text into less historiography and more of an adventure tale. Part of this Jewish adaptation or literary mediation is the import of fantastic elements. Dragon, dwarf and giant become the main signifiers for a transnational, transcultural and ultimately translingual experiment.

[Ammenmährchen]

Fast forward 100 years. If Wagenseil tries to stress the historic-national sources that tie Viduvilt both to Charlemagne and the Carolingian era, to King Arthur and the English, the 18th century Ferdinand Roth considers the text an outright fairytale. Thus, he conceives his prose adaption as a fairy tale with the title: *Vom Könige Artus und von dem bildschönen Ritter Wieduwilt. Ein Ammenmährchen* [*About King Arthur and the beautiful Sir Gabein. An Old Wives' Tale*] (1786). The text offers a definitively humorous take on the narrative, a genre parody with anti-Catholic undertones and the most humorous take on the story of Gawein's/Gabein's son. While Roth refers to the Yiddish predecessor as Jewish romance (20,21), he repeatedly calls it a fairy tale (18, 27) based on the fact that it tells fictional stories set in a long-gone past with an abundance of fantastic creatures. Setting the fairy tale tone from the outset, the actual narrative begins with the German equivalent of once upon a time: "Es war einmal" / (29).

[Scholarship]

Both Wagenseil and Roth offer their interpretation of the material and its heritage from a lack of familiarity with Arthurian romance, a genre that was unpopular and largely unknown in German-speaking lands from the late 16th to the end of the 18th century. For contemporary Arthurian scholars, the question about where the fantastic creatures enter the tradition, that is, what's their literary source and origin, is then much less confusing, as these figures were constant companions of Arthurian material. The problem is that we have only one Arthurian Yiddish romance and that the medieval Hebrew romance Melekh Artus presents a completely different type of text, at times called an anti-Arthurian romance. In consequence, some scholars have asked the question whether or not dragons and giants could perhaps count as a specific Jewish feature. Some critics describe the majority of changes in *Viduvilt* as reactions to the religious-cultural background of the adaptors' Jewish target audience. Some scholars relate the

representation of the giant to the fight between Moses and the giant Og in the Talmudic tractate *Berakoth* (Warnock 1981: 104; Tarantul 2002: 389–394); and compare the depiction of the dragon to the Biblical Leviathan (Jaeger 2000: 269, 298). The search for religious-cultural Jewish elements extends further to the mother of the giant, who is perceived by these scholars as an evil temptress akin to Lilith (Jaeger 2000: 286; Thomas 2005: 61; to a lesser extent Häberlein 2012: 82).[4]

While we cannot affirm that these themes and figures did not impact the depiction, the sole attribution of fantastic elements to an explicit Jewish tradition implies the assumption that premodern Jews could not enjoy non-Jewish literature. As far as we can tell, the opposite is true. Concerned with the type of literature the Yiddish-speaking Jews were consuming, Jewish scholars and translators warned repeatedly against the consumption of fictional literature.

[Conclusion]

Premodern Jewish audiences' familiarity with non-religious fictional literature exceeded that of Arthurian romance, often to the displeasure of authors and adaptors of religious texts who marketed their works as more valuable pastimes than courtly texts. Michael Adam warns against heroic epic in the preface to his Pentateuch translation (Constance 1560): "This book is likewise good for wives and young women who all know well how to read Yiddish, but who pass their time by reading worthless books such as *Ditraykh fun Bern*, *Hildebrand* and other like them which are nothing but lies and invented things."[5] Similarly, in the preface to his Yiddish translation of the Psalms from 1545, Elia Levita promotes his text as an alternative to a non-religious literature that seemed to have been too popular for his taste amongst his contemporaneous readership.[6] Adam and Levita's concern underscores the popularity of non-religious, entertaining text full of fantastic story worlds featuring dragons, dwarfs, and giants among early modern Jewish readers. This fascination exceeded the literary sphere, finding expression in Jews' everyday lives, as the murals from a patrician's house in Zurich (approx. 1330) illustrate. These murals, which display courtly dancing scenes, were commissioned by the

[4] Bianca Häberlein's (2012) focuses mostly on the different audiences and their religious backgrounds, perceiving changes within the adaptations through the lenses of the audiences' respective cultural and religious needs.
[5] Baumgarten, *Introduction to Old Yiddish Literature*, 156.

[6] Howard, "Hebrew-German and Early Yiddish Literature,"11.

home's Jewish owner as decorations for the hall.[7] Adam and Levita's complaints, as well as the Zurich murals, are only a few examples among many illustrating a familiarity with courtly literature and tradition within the Jewish community. This fascination and familiarity are represented in the fantastic elements in Yiddish Arthuriana and the existence of non-religious fantastic Yiddish pre-modern literature itself. The obsession among scholars with assigning these elements to a Jewish-religious background underscores that these fantastic elements are still disregarded, misinterpreted, and ultimately an unexpected element in non-religious Jewish literature of the premodern period.

[7] See the article and comprehensive analysis of Edith Wenzel, "Ein neuer Fund. Mittelalterliche Wandmalereien in Zürich," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 116 (1997): 417-426.