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Jewish Cultural Traditions within a Modernising Early Soviet Framework: Y. Goldberg's 1935 Yiddish *Othello*

Lily Kahn

Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies, UCL, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This article explores the Yiddish *Othello* translation produced under Soviet state auspices by the Russian Jewish folklorist Y. Goldberg and published in 1935 by the State Press of Belorussia. It is the first study devoted to Goldberg's Yiddish Shakespeare translations. The article will consider the ways in which Goldberg's translation reflects a tension between a modernising Soviet ideology on the one hand, and traditional Eastern European Jewish culture on the other. The former is manifested in the translation through its use of an accessible Soviet Yiddish style; through Goldberg's avoidance of citations from classical Jewish sources; and through his characterisation of Desdemona as an admirably modern and progressive woman. The latter is manifested through domesticating elements, specifically allusions to Jewish traditions such as *oylemhaze* 'the Present World', *taneysim* 'fast days', and *yichus* (Jewish ancestral pedigree); and references to Eastern European Jewish realia (e.g. herring and turnips). Examination of Goldberg's work provides a fascinating perspective on an understudied aspect of the Jewish relationship with Shakespeare. The article fits into the wider context of Jewish language, literature, and culture in the early Soviet period, and of multicultural and minority-language Shakespeare more broadly.

KEYWORDS

Yiddish; Shakespeare; Soviet Union; Y. Goldberg; Jewish; USSR

Introduction

This article constitutes the first examination of Y. Goldberg's Yiddish-language translation of *Othello*, published under state auspices in Minsk in 1935. Goldberg's Yiddish *Othello* can give us insight into the reception of Shakespeare among early Soviet Jews in general, particularly the ways in which the play's themes of gender, religion, and ethnicity are reflected within this specific political and cultural context. The early Soviet period provides us with an unusual perspective on the intersection of official Soviet ideology and Jewish

CONTACT Lily Kahn  l.kahn@ucl.ac.uk

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religious culture as reflected through the linguistic prism of Yiddish, the Eastern European Jewish vernacular which had gained substantial government backing and support in the early USSR. This article will focus on the ways in which Goldberg negotiated the tension between the need to conform to a modernising, secularist Soviet agenda, and the fact that the language into which he was translating was deeply rooted in the traditional Eastern European Jewish worldview, which was often at odds with this agenda.

Historical Background to Goldberg's *Othello* Translation

Early Jewish Shakespeare Translations in Central and Eastern Europe and the United States

The translation of Shakespeare's plays into Jewish languages dates back to early nineteenth-century Central Europe, when authors began to translate individual portions of plays and sonnets into Hebrew (Almagor). The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century witnessed the appearance of the first complete translations of Shakespeare into Hebrew in Eastern Europe (Almagor; Golomb; Kahn). The first version of a Shakespeare play to appear in Yiddish was Bezalel Vishnipolski's prose adaptation of *Julius Caesar*, which was published in Warsaw in 1886 (Prager 150). The first Yiddish translations of *Othello* appeared and were staged in the United States in the 1890s (see Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage* 113–39 for discussion). Further Yiddish Shakespeare translations and adaptations appeared throughout the first half of the twentieth century, both in Eastern Europe and in the United States.¹

There seem to have been no translations of *Othello* into Yiddish published in Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, nor were there Eastern European stagings of the play in Yiddish in this period. This may be ascribable at least in part to the fact that there was a czarist ban on Yiddish performances in force between 1883 and 1905, which though perhaps not strictly enforced (Klier) is still likely to have had an impact (Warnke 1–2, 4–6); in addition, there was heavy censorship of Yiddish publications, particularly the press, literary journals, and other periodicals in Russia during this period (Fishman 21–25). The first Yiddish performance of *Othello* in Eastern Europe took place in Romania in 1909, with Yiddish actor and playwright Sigmund (born Asher-Zelig) Feinman in the titular role (Warnke and Shandler 81). In czarist Russia the number of Yiddish

¹See Abend-David for an appendix chronicling the history of Yiddish Shakespeare translations and stagings from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See also Abend-David, Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage*, Chaver, Coodin (197–244), Lehman, and Warnke and Shandler for discussion and analysis of Yiddish translations and adaptations from this period, chiefly *The Merchant of Venice*. There are further scholarly sources devoted to theatrical stagings of Yiddish Shakespeare versions (e.g. Kinsley; Nahshon), as opposed to translations; I have not included a comprehensive list of such sources here as the performance history of Shakespeare in Yiddish is beyond the scope of this article.

Shakespeare performances increased after the end of the ban in 1905, and the use of American Yiddish translations used in such stagings was frequent between then and the outbreak of World War I (Warnke; see also Henry for discussion of Yiddish theatre other than Shakespeare in czarist Russia between 1905 and 1917). Following the Russian Revolution of October 1917, the status of Yiddish was to change dramatically in the areas of Eastern Europe constituting parts of the newly established Soviet Union, and these would lead to the appearance of a distinct type of Yiddish Shakespeare translation produced in a strikingly different cultural and political context.

Yiddish Language, Literature, and Theatre in the Early Soviet Union

In the early twentieth century, Yiddish came to be associated with socialism and communism in Russia, and was perceived as the language of the Jewish proletariat – in contrast to Hebrew, which was associated with religious rituals and was regarded as bourgeois (Estraikh, *Yiddish and the Cold War 1*; Shneer 42). These positive perceptions of Yiddish in Russian communist circles had a significant impact on its status in the early Soviet period: following the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, the position of Yiddish was elevated and it was given substantial state support (see Estraikh, *Soviet Yiddish* for details). During this period Yiddish enjoyed an even higher status in Belorussia – where Goldberg’s Shakespeare translations were published – than in other Soviet republics: while elsewhere in the USSR Yiddish received government support, in Belorussia between 1920 and 1938 it was classed as a fully-fledged official language, along with Russian, Belarusian, and Polish (Kozhinova).

In the 1920s and 1930s, this high level of state support resulted in a blossoming of Yiddish literary and cultural production within the USSR. As Shneer (2) observes, this development was remarkable within the global Yiddish context: ‘in the 1920s, the Soviet Union was the only country in the world to have state-sponsored Yiddish-language publishing houses, writers’ groups, courts, city councils, and schools.’² Soviet support for Yiddish language and culture included the establishment of a state-funded network of Yiddish-language theatres, called GOSET (*Gosudarstvenny Evreysky Teatr*) or, in English, the Soviet State Yiddish Theatres. The first GOSET theatre was founded in Petrograd (St Petersburg), which was then the capital of the nascent USSR, before moving to Moscow the following year. In addition to the Moscow GOSET, there were also major GOSET theatres in the other main Soviet Jewish population centres, namely Minsk (Belorussia), Kharkov (Ukraine), and Birobidzhan (the capital of the Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidzhan in the east of the

²However, owing to the political gulf that existed at this point between the Soviet Union and other countries with large Yiddish-speaking Jewish populations (e.g. Poland, Lithuania, and other Eastern European nations as well as the United States, etc.), Soviet-produced Yiddish literature was not typically widely distributed or read internationally (cf. Estraikh, *Soviet Yiddish* 24).

USSR); moreover, there were around 15 smaller GOSET theatres in other Jewish communities throughout the USSR (Veidlinger, ‘Soviet State Yiddish Theaters’). GOSET was a prominent feature of Soviet Jewish cultural life throughout the 1920s and 1930s (see Harshav, *Moscow Yiddish Theater*; Veidlinger, *Jewish Culture*, ‘Cultural and Political Phenomenon’; ‘Soviet State Yiddish Theaters’).

During this early Soviet period of flourishing Yiddish literary and cultural productivity, two individuals were involved in the rendition of Shakespeare’s plays into the language. One was the well-known Soviet Yiddish poet, dramatist, and translator Shmuel Halkin (see Krutikov). Halkin only translated one Shakespeare play, *King Lear*, into Yiddish. Halkin’s *Lear* was translated indirectly via a Russian-language intermediary (Moore 125) and was staged by the Moscow GOSET in 1935. The production, starring the prominent Soviet Jewish actor Solomon Mikhoels (see Veidlinger, ‘Mikhoels’), was regarded as a landmark not only within the Soviet Jewish community, but also worldwide.³ Halkin’s translation was published in Moscow two years after the GOSET production (Halkin). The other translator – and the only one to have translated Shakespeare’s work directly from English – was the little-known figure Y. Goldberg, whose work will form the focus of this article.

Goldberg’s Yiddish Translation of *Othello*

Goldberg’s Life and Work

Virtually nothing is known about Goldberg’s life apart from the fact that he was a folklorist (Prager 157). Even his first name is unclear; only the initial *yud* ‘Y’ appears in his publications.⁴ Goldberg was active in the early Soviet period as a translator and produced Yiddish versions of nine of Shakespeare’s plays between 1933 and 1938, namely *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tempest*, *Richard III*, *Julius Caesar*, *Henry IV Part 1*, *Henry IV Part 2*, and *Macbeth*. He seems to have been the first to translate *Othello* into Yiddish in Eastern Europe. Goldberg’s Shakespeare translations, including his *Othello*, were all commissioned and produced with Soviet state support, were published by the State Press of Belorussia in Minsk, and were intended for performance in Soviet Yiddish theatres. Prager (157) believes that they were never staged. However, given the fact that Goldberg translated such a substantial number of Shakespearean plays, as well as the fact that they were produced under Belorussian state auspices and edited by one of the most high-profile Soviet Yiddish writers of the period (see next section), it is possible that they were actually

³For example, the British Shakespearean scholar Gordon Craig wrote in the *Times* in 1935 that ‘only now, after having returned from the Theatre Festival in Moscow, do I understand why we have no *Lear* worthy of the name in Britain. The reason is quite simple: we have no actor like Mikhoels’ (qtd. in Harshav, *Moscow Yiddish Theater* 5).

⁴Goldberg’s first name is listed as *Itshe* in the Harvard University library catalogue, as *Yosef* in the National Library of Israel catalogue, and as *Isa* in Moore (126).

performed at the GOSET theatre in Minsk but that the documentation of the stagings has either not survived or has not been made available to researchers. Goldberg was apparently killed during the Stalinist liquidation of Yiddish culture in the late 1940s and early 1950s (Prager 157; Moore 126). This was an extremely dark time for Yiddish and, more broadly, for Jewish life and culture in the Soviet Union, with large numbers of Yiddish writers, intellectuals, and anti-fascist activists sent to prison camps, assassinated, and executed; for example, Shmuel Halkin was arrested and sent to a prison camp in 1948 (Krutikov), while Solomon Mikhoels was assassinated on Stalin's orders in the same year (Veidlinger, 'Mikhoels').

Publication Details and Basic Structure of Goldberg's Othello Translation

Goldberg's אָטעלע *otelo* 'Othello' was produced under the editorial supervision of the prominent Soviet Yiddish writer and poet Moyshe Kulbak (see Novershtern for an overview of Kulbak's life and work). A note on the final page of the volume (Goldberg 152), which is otherwise restricted to publication information, mentions that it was translated from the Cambridge edition of Shakespeare's works. This seems to be a reference to the original 1866 Cambridge edition edited by William George Clark and William Aldis Wright, as the subsequent Cambridge edition of *Othello* (Walker and Wilson) was first published two decades after Goldberg's translation.⁵

Goldberg's version adheres to the structure of the original in that it does not omit lines or sections; likewise, it maintains the verse/prose distinction of the source text, retains the T/V pronoun distinctions present in the original,⁶ and finds Yiddish equivalents for the rhyming couplets appearing in the English. Goldberg also retains the original personal names, spelling them phonetically in Yiddish, e.g. אָטעלע *otelo* 'Othello', דעזדעמאָנע *dezdemone* 'Desdemona', יאָגאָ *yago* 'Iago', קאַסיו *kasyo* 'Cassio', and keeps the original toponyms and ethnonyms rather than domesticating them to Eastern European Jewish parallels (in contrast to e.g. nineteenth-century Jewish Shakespeare translations into Hebrew, which are highly domesticating; see Kahn for details of these translations, and Venuti for the concept of domesticating translations in general), e.g. קיפּער *kiper* 'Cyprus', ראָדאָס *rodos* 'Rhodes', טערקן *terkn* 'Turks', מאָוור *mavr* 'Moor', ווענעציע *venetsye* 'Venice'. Goldberg opts for a similar approach in his treatment of references to Greek and Roman mythology, which would have been largely unfamiliar to Yiddish-speaking target audiences:

⁵In the Shakespeare citations in the following sections, line references within the body of the text are to the Oxford Shakespeare (Wells, Taylor, Jowett, and Montgomery), with the equivalent line references in the Clark and Wright Cambridge edition provided in footnotes. The English citations themselves are from the Clark and Wright edition, as this is most likely the one that Goldberg himself used.

⁶During the Soviet period the T/V distinction in pronouns was a standard feature of Russian (Mayer) as well as of Yiddish, so Goldberg's decision to include this feature in his translation is not noteworthy from the perspective of his own linguistic context. See 3.3.3 for further discussion of the T/V distinction in Goldberg's *Othello*.

he retains the original names, e.g. אָלימפּ *olimp* ‘Olympus’, יאנוס *yanus* ‘Janus’, and יופיטער *yupiter* ‘Jove’, but provides brief explanations of them for his readers in endnotes (see below). Likewise, he preserves the Christian references appearing in the English source text, e.g. צו פעטער דעם אפאָסטאָל *tsu peter dem apostol* ‘to Peter the Apostle’, איך בין אַ קריסטן *ikh bin a kristn* ‘I am a Christian’, instead of removing or domesticating them for the benefit of his Jewish readership.

Following the conclusion of the play, Goldberg (148–49) provides a short paratextual addendum containing information about the circumstances of *Othello*’s original composition and publication, some contextualisation regarding its Venetian setting, and an observation that it is more than simply a personal tale of jealousy, but also a commentary on broader social issues such as the role of women and ethnic outsiders. Goldberg’s addendum provides a crucial insight into his *skopos*, or translatorial perspective and intention (see Pym for discussion of this term). Goldberg’s addendum will be discussed in more detail in section 3.3.3 below.

Goldberg’s paratextual addendum is followed by a series of 61 endnotes providing short explanatory comments on individual lines and words within the play (e.g. the status of Florence in Shakespeare’s day, Greek and Roman mythological terms, military ranks, etc.), and notes on individual translation choices. Like the addendum, Goldberg’s endnotes can shed light on his translation decisions and his interpretation of the source text, and will be referred to at several points in sections 3.3 and 3.4 below.

Modernising Soviet Elements in the Translation

Goldberg’s translation is clearly a product of its early Soviet political and cultural setting. Goldberg’s adherence to Soviet ideological norms can be seen in a number of different core aspects of his work, including the Yiddish language appearing in it, the absence of classical Jewish textual citations, and the characterisation of Desdemona as a modern and progressive woman. Each of these issues will be discussed in turn in the following three subsections.

The Soviet Yiddish of Goldberg’s Translation

Goldberg’s *Othello*, like other Yiddish works produced in the Soviet Union during this period, is printed in the standard Soviet Yiddish orthography that was developed in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The Soviet Yiddish orthography differs markedly from Yiddish orthographies used outside of the USSR (see Estraiikh, *Soviet Yiddish* 115–26 for details). The orthography of Goldberg’s *Othello* thus marks it out immediately and unambiguously as a product of its particular political context.

Goldberg’s translation features a contemporary Yiddish style made up largely of commonly used, high-frequency words that would be understandable

to a broad readership rather than appealing primarily to a particularly literary audience. Likewise, the translation does not contain many idioms or complex wordplays. While it is unclear whether Goldberg employed this translation style out of explicit ideological considerations, irrespective of his motivations it has the effect of making the text accessible to as many people as possible, and therefore is in keeping with Soviet policies of creating literature and art for the proletariat.

An example of this can be seen in the translation of Iago's 'preferment goes by letter and affection' (1.1.35⁷), which Goldberg (4) renders as follows:

א העכערונג באקומט מען \ דורכ א פראָטעקציע, א בריוו, א כיינדל

a hekherung bakumt men / durkh a protektsye, a briv, a kheyndl

'Promotions are granted / through personal connections, a letter, a bit of flirtation'.⁸

In addition to translating the high-register English term 'preferment' with the more accessible Yiddish equivalent העכערונג *hekherung* 'promotion', Goldberg has modified the line through the addition of the word פראָטעקציע *protektsye*, a widely used Yiddish term for the personal connections that can be used to pull strings in order to help obtain employment, goods, favours, and the like. Goldberg's insertion of this term serves to lend the line in question a nuance of quotidian vividness in the target text and guarantee its relatability for any Yiddish speaker in early Soviet Russia, where *protektsye* was a fact of daily life.

Conversely, Goldberg's text is characterised by a complete lack of Soviet neologisms and borrowings from Russian. This is noteworthy because it runs somewhat counter to the marked tendency in early state-sponsored Soviet Yiddish writing to introduce Russian terms and forms into the language in order to propagate particular political and societal concepts. As noted by Estraiikh (*Soviet Yiddish* 45–51), the introduction of a large number of Russianisms into state-supported Soviet Yiddish publications such as novels and the press made the language difficult to understand for everyday Yiddish speakers, who tended to avoid them as a result. The fact that Goldberg's text is completely devoid of such Russianisms suggests that his translation was targeted towards the average Yiddish reader to a greater degree than was perhaps the case for other state-sponsored publications in the language.⁹

⁷This line number is the same in Clark and Wright.

⁸English translations of Goldberg's Yiddish text are mine.

⁹The lack of Russianisms in Goldberg's text is unlikely to be attributable to the fact that his translation was produced in Belorussia rather than Russia, since (a) urban Yiddish-speaking Jews in Belorussia who were the most likely target audience for his *Othello* would have been unlikely to speak Belorussian, and (b) there are no Belorussian elements in his work either. Lack of Belorussian elements is typical of Soviet Yiddish more generally (Estraiikh 23–61).

Lack of Citations from Jewish Textual Sources

In addition to the accessible and contemporary language that it employs, Goldberg's translation is characterised by a complete lack of citations (i.e. phrases, sentences, and verses) from the Hebrew Bible, from traditional postbiblical Hebrew and Aramaic Jewish sources such as the Mishnah (the oldest compilation of Jewish oral law, redacted around 200 CE), the Talmud (the central compendium of Jewish law, which builds on the Mishnah and dates to around the 6th–7th centuries CE), and from prominent medieval and early modern biblical and Talmudic commentators such as Rashi and Abraham Ibn Ezra. The fact that Goldberg's *Othello* is devoid of such citations is noteworthy as it distinguishes his text from much of earlier Yiddish literature, whether original or translated, which tends to employ such citations as a matter of course, as an intrinsic component of the language (see Harshav, *Meaning of Yiddish*, especially 51–61, 92–107, and 150–60). Goldberg's avoidance of citations from classical Jewish sources may be rooted in the broader Soviet opposition to Jewish religious culture (along with, of course, other religions), and its expressly anti-religious ideology which eschewed the study of traditional Hebrew texts; thus, in this respect his *Othello* translation complies with the Soviet vision of a secular communist Yiddish-language Jewish society.

Goldberg's Characterisation of Desdemona

Goldberg devotes a substantial portion of his paratextual addendum to a discussion of his views on the character of Desdemona. In the addendum, Goldberg (148) describes Shakespeare's tragic heroine as a

דרייסטע, פראַגרעסיווע פרוי פון איר צײַט

dreyste, progresive froy fun ir tsayt

'daring, progressive woman of her time'.

A similar observation can be found in one of Goldberg's explanatory endnotes, which comments on the exchange between Desdemona and Iago regarding the nature of women that takes place in Act 2, Scene 1 (2.1.103–67¹⁰). This exchange concludes with Desdemona cautioning Emilia in 2.1.164–65¹¹, 'O most lame and impotent conclusion! Do not learn of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband'. Goldberg (39) translates these lines as follows:

אכ סארא הינקעדיקער, ניט פאסנדיקער אויספיר! עמיליע, לערנ זיך ניט אָפּ פֿון אימ גאַרנישט, כאַטש ער
איז דיין מאַן!

*akh sara hinkediker, nit pasndiker oysfir! emilye, lern zikh nit op fun im gornisht,
khotsh er iz dayn man!*

¹⁰2.1.100–62 in Clark and Wright.

¹¹2.1.160–61 in Clark and Wright.

‘Oh, what a lame, unfitting conclusion! Emilia, do not learn anything from him, though he is your husband!’

In Goldberg’s endnote regarding the exchange (150, n. 18), he comments that Desdemona’s remarks reveal her to be a progressive woman

וואס באנוגנט זיך שוין ניט מער מיט דער פערספעקטיוו צו זיין א הויז-באלעבאָסטע [...] אָדער א קורטיזאנע

vos banugnt zikh shoyrn nit mer mit der perspektiv tsu zayn a hoyz-baleboste [...] oder a kurtizane

‘who is no longer satisfied with the prospect of being a housewife [...] or a courtesan’.

Given the brevity of Goldberg’s addendum and the sparsity of his endnotes, the repetition of his observation that Desdemona is a progressive woman is noteworthy and indicates that he regards this issue to be a particularly central one to the play.

In addition to his paratextual material, Goldberg’s views on Desdemona’s character are evident in the body of his translation. While in the Yiddish version the heroine’s lines (like those of the other characters) are generally very close to those in the source text, Goldberg makes a noteworthy and systematic departure from the English original in his translation of Desdemona’s forms of address for Othello. While in the English version Desdemona frequently refers to her husband as ‘my lord’, in Goldberg’s version she never utters this phrase, calling him instead ‘my husband’ or a variation thereof. This strategy can first be seen in Act 1, Scene 2, when Desdemona confronts her father about her decision to leave his household to live with Othello. In the English version (1.3.187¹²), she refers to Othello as ‘the Moor my lord’. In Goldberg’s version (23), the line reads:

מײַן מאַן, דעם מאַוור

mayn man, dem mavr

‘my husband, the Moor’

Particularly when examined within the context of Goldberg’s own paratextual comments on Desdemona’s character, his replacement of the English ‘lord’ with the Yiddish מאַן *man* ‘husband’ indicates a conscious decision to substitute a term laden with connotations of power imbalance and patriarchy with a more neutral one. He could have chosen the literal Yiddish equivalent האַר *har* ‘lord’, which has similar associations to its English equivalent, but he intentionally rejected this option in order for his heroine to embody more faithfully his views regarding her modern and progressive nature.

¹²1.3.189 in Clark and Wright.

Further instances of Goldberg's strategy can be seen, for example, in Desdemona's conversation with Othello about the missing handkerchief in 3.4.46–49.¹³ Desdemona twice addresses her husband as 'my lord' in the source text, first in 3.4.46¹⁴ 'here, my lord' and again in 3.4.49¹⁵ 'no, indeed, my lord'. In Goldberg's translation (86), by contrast, the word 'lord' is omitted both times: his equivalent of 'here, my lord' is מאנ מיינ מאנ, *ot, mayn man* 'here, my husband', while his version of 'no, indeed, my lord' is ניט ווירקלעכ, *neyn! virklekh, nit* 'no! really, not', which dispenses with the phrase 'my lord' altogether.

The exchange between Lodovico, Othello, and Desdemona in Act 4, Scene 1 contains similar illustrations of Goldberg's policy. In the English version of 4.1.208–9,¹⁶ Desdemona says 'Cousin, there's fall'n between him and my lord / An unkind breach'. Goldberg's version (103) reads:

ס'איז, קאָרער, צווישן אימ און מיינ אָטעלאָ \ א שפאלטונג
s'iz, korev, tsvishn im un mayn otelo / a shpaltung

'There is, relative, between him and my Othello / a split'

As in Act 3, here Goldberg's replacement of 'my lord' with מיינ אָטעלאָ *mayn otelo* 'my Othello' underscores the fact that Desdemona regards herself as her husband's equal, not his inferior. Goldberg maintains his translation strategy throughout this exchange (4.1.210–32¹⁷), with the numerous subsequent instances of English 'my lord' all replaced with the Yiddish מיינ מאנ *mayn man* or מאנ מיינער *man mayner*, both meaning 'my husband' (103–4). Goldberg is absolutely consistent in his translation of Desdemona's references to her husband throughout the play: strikingly, even in the deathbed scene (Act 5, Scene 2) she refers to Othello as מאנ מיינ *mayn man* or מאנ מיינער *man mayner* 'my husband' while begging for her life, in contrast to the English original which contains several occurrences of 'my lord'.

The intentionality of Goldberg's technique is underscored by the fact that he does not follow the same pattern in his translation of Emilia's lines. For example, in Act 4, Scene 2 when Emilia and Desdemona are discussing Othello, Emilia refers to him a number of times as 'lord', e.g. in 4.2.96¹⁸ 'Good madam, what's the matter with my lord?' Goldberg (111) renders this as follows:

סיניאַרע, וואָס האָט דאָס געטראַפֿן מיטן האַר?
sinyore, vos hot dos getrofn mitn har?

¹³3.4.50–54 in Clark and Wright.

¹⁴3.4.50 in Clark and Wright.

¹⁵3.4.54 in Clark and Wright.

¹⁶4.1.217–18 in Clark and Wright.

¹⁷4.1.220–45 in Clark and Wright.

¹⁸4.2.97 in Clark and Wright.

‘Signora, what has happened to my lord?’

In the continuation of this exchange, Desdemona asks (4.2.98¹⁹), ‘Who is thy lord?’, to which Emilia responds ‘He that is yours’. In Goldberg’s version (111), Desdemona asks,

ווער איז דיין האר?

ver iz dayn har?

‘Who is your lord?’

Emilia answers,

ער וואָס איז אייערער

er vos iz ayerer

‘He who is yours’²⁰

This exchange highlights the difference in mentality between Goldberg’s Emilia and his Desdemona. While Desdemona invariably avoids using the term ‘lord’ with reference to her husband, Emilia clearly regards Othello as Desdemona’s lord (as well as her own, in that he is her employer and superior), since the ellipsis אייערער *ayerer* ‘yours’ refers back to her initial description of him as האר *har* ‘lord’.

Act 4, Scene 2 of Goldberg’s translation contains two further alterations to Desdemona’s lines which serve subtly to highlight his view that she is a strong and self-confident woman, even as her position vis-à-vis her husband becomes progressively more precarious. The first is her statement that ‘I am a child to chiding’ (4.2.117²¹), which Goldberg (111) renders as follows:

איך בין א קינד, וואָס מעג זיך לערנען

ikh bin a kind, vos meg zikh lernen

‘I am a child, who can learn’

Whereas Shakespeare’s Desdemona is stating that she is unused to the type of verbal abuse that Othello has been meting out to her, Goldberg’s translation

¹⁹4.2.102 in Clark and Wright.

²⁰Readers of Yiddish will note that in the exchange between Emilia and Desdemona, Emilia employs the formal 2SG pronoun איר *ir* while Desdemona employs the informal equivalent די *du*. This is an example of Goldberg’s systematic decision (as mentioned in 3.2) to maintain the T/V pronominal distinctions present in the original play. Goldberg’s policy in this respect extends to the dialogues between Othello and Desdemona: while Othello often uses the informal pronoun when speaking to her, she typically employs the formal one when addressing him. Given Goldberg’s perception of Desdemona as a modern and progressive woman, in such exchanges one might have expected him to replace her formal pronouns with their informal counterparts, as this would be a clear way for him further to underscore her stance on gender equality. However, in this respect his broader choice to adhere to the T/V distinctions in the English version seems have overridden any potential consideration of such a change.

²¹4.2.114 in Clark and Wright.

paints her somewhat differently as a woman who, though inexperienced in situations such as that in which she finds herself, is open to and capable of improving her skills. While the divergence between the two versions is understated, Goldberg's rendition helps to reinforce the picture he has created of a confident and competent heroine who is aware of her own abilities.

The second instance is Desdemona's remark 'And ever will—though he do shake me off / To beggarly divorcement—love him dearly' (4.2.161–62²²). Goldberg's version (114) reads somewhat differently:

און וועל אימ אייביק ליבן, כאַטש ער מעג אפילע \ מיכ, ווי א בעטלערן, פארשטויסן

un vel im eybik libn, khotsh er meg afile / mikh, vi a betlern, farshtoyasn

'And will always love him, though he might even / Push me away like a beggarwoman'

As in the previous example, this change is subtle but serves to alter the perception of Desdemona in a way that highlights her power and self-confidence. While Shakespeare's Desdemona accepts the idea of a future spent in poverty should Othello reject her, Goldberg's heroine is a stronger woman who merely states that she will continue to love Othello even if he spurns her *as one would* a beggar. Her horizons are broader and she can envision a life for herself following the end of her relationship with her husband, rather than acquiescing to the notion that destitution would be her only option in such a scenario.

Goldberg's characterisation of Desdemona reflects the Soviet ideal of gender equality which was widely promoted and espoused in this period (see Stites; Wood; Clements 158–210). According to his analysis, Desdemona is a fitting heroine for the revolutionary and modernising early Soviet context. Moreover, Goldberg's interpretation of Desdemona places her in opposition to the long Jewish tradition of *shidukhim* (arranged marriages). In this respect, he is actually following in the footsteps of the editor of the first Hebrew translation of *Othello*, who argued in the 1870s that the play highlights the injustice of *shidukhim* (Smolenskin xxix–xxxi; see Kahn, *First Hebrew Shakespeare Translations* 66–71 for an English translation). Goldberg's Soviet translation can be regarded as the culmination of a stream of modernising thought which had its roots in the Jewish Enlightenment and merged with Soviet conceptions of gender equality.²³

²²4.2.158–59 in Clark and Wright.

²³Note that similar ideals of gender equality were promoted by socialist and communist Jewish groups outside of the USSR in the early twentieth century, for example the kibbutz movement in Ottoman and Mandate Palestine (Ramon; Near).

Traditional Jewish Cultural Elements in the Translation

Despite the modernising tendencies seen throughout Goldberg's *Othello* that reflect Soviet ideologies and priorities, and the fact that his translation does not contain citations of Jewish textual sources, he nevertheless partly follows the tradition of earlier Yiddish and Hebrew Shakespeare translations, which exhibited a marked tendency towards domestication. This can be seen in many of the Yiddish Shakespeare translations and adaptations produced in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Jacob Gordin's popular 1892 adaptation *The Jewish King Lear*, which recast Shakespeare's pre-Christian British king as a late nineteenth-century Eastern European Jew (Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage* 31–72). The domesticating model is also characteristic of literature rendered into Jewish languages throughout the medieval and early modern periods (see Needler; Singerman for discussion of domestication in Hebrew translations; see Baumgarten 128–206 for Yiddish translations; see Armistead and Silverman for Judeo-Spanish translations).

Goldberg's domesticating tendencies can be seen in the allusions to Jewish cultural traditions appearing in his translation, as well as the replacement of certain unfamiliar items and concepts with equivalents that would be more widely recognised by an Eastern European Jewish readership. These domesticating techniques will be discussed in turn in the following two subsections.

Allusions to Jewish Cultural Traditions

Goldberg's *Othello* contains several subtle but nonetheless distinct lexical allusions to traditional Jewish cultural elements which exist in tension with the modernising Soviet tendencies seen elsewhere in his translation. One such allusion appears near the beginning of the play, when Iago states in the source text 'Yet for necessity of present life / I must show out a flag and sign of love' (1.1.158–59²⁴). In Goldberg's version (9), these lines read as follows:

דאָך מוז איך פאַרן ביסל אוילעמהאַזע \ אויסשטעלן די פּאַג פּונ ליבע

dokh muz ikh farn bisl oylemhaze / aroysshteln di fon fun libe

'But for a bit of the Present World / I must display the flag of love'.

Goldberg translates Shakespeare's phrase 'present life' as אוילעמהאַזע *oylemhaze* 'the Present World'. This is a Yiddish term for the physical, material world (Niborski 370) deriving from the Hebrew עולם הזה *'olam haz-ze*, which literally means 'this world' but has the same connotations as its Yiddish equivalent. The Hebrew term first appears in various places in the Mishnah. For example, in the Mishnaic chapter *Pirke Avot* (4.16), עולם הזה *'olam haz-ze* is mentioned in a

²⁴1.1.155–56 in Clark and Wright.

comparison with *עולם הבא* *'olam hab-ba* 'the world to come', a parallel term which refers to the afterlife: 'This world is like a vestibule before the world to come; prepare yourself in the vestibule, so that you may enter the banquet-hall'. It is also widely attested in the Talmud and in later rabbinic literature. (See Rosenblatt for further discussion of *עולם הבא* *'olam hab-ba* 'the world to come' and Levy for an in-depth analysis of the concept as a component of rabbinic authority in the Mishnaic period.) Both terms are familiar concepts within the Jewish religious and cultural tradition; as such, they would have been well known and commonly used by Yiddish speakers in the 1930s, and would have had unmistakable associations with Jewish tradition. Goldberg's selection of this term as an equivalent of Shakespeare's 'present life' thus serves, whether intentionally or otherwise, to detract subtly from the translation's explicitly secular Soviet perspective because it is so strongly linked with traditional Jewish culture.

A second example of a translation choice that strongly evokes the Jewish cultural tradition appears in the final scene of the play. In Shakespeare's text, immediately before murdering his wife Othello says 'I would not kill thy unprepared spirit' (5.3.33²⁵). Goldberg's version (130) reads:

איך וועל ניט טויטן דיין געשאַמע איצט אָן ווידוי

ikh vel nit toytn dayn neshome itst on vide

'I will not kill your spirit now without a deathbed confession'.

The Hebrew-origin Yiddish term *ווידוי* *vide* has explicitly Jewish associations, referring to the traditional deathbed confession made by observant Jews (see 'Confession of Sins' for discussion of the history of this practice within Judaism). As in the case of *אויילעמהאזע* *oylemhaze* 'the Present World', Goldberg's choice of this term, with its very particular Jewish connotations, serves to inject an element of cultural and religious specificity into his translation which would not have gone unnoticed amongst his target readership.

A third example of this phenomenon can be seen in Goldberg's translation of Shakespeare's 'fasting, and prayer' (3.4.40), which reads *געבעט טאנייסיים*, *taney-sim*, *gebet* 'fasts, prayer' (85). The Yiddish word *טאנייסיים* *taneysim* 'fasts' is a specific term which traditionally refers to one of the cycle of minor (dawn-to-nightfall) fast days that occur at various points on the Jewish calendar, such as *טאָנעס עסטער* (or, in the Soviet Yiddish orthography, *טעניט אסתר*) *tones ester* 'the fast of Esther', the fast day that falls on the day before the festival of Purim. Most of these fast days are discussed in the Mishnah and the Talmud (in tractate *Ta'anit* 'Fasts'; see also Milgrom and Herr), while the Fast of Esther is likely to have emerged later, in the medieval period (First). Observing the fast days is regarded as compulsory in Jewish law (see e.g.

²⁵5.3.31 in Clark and Wright.

Ganzfried, the most popular Orthodox halachic [Jewish legal] compendium for Central and Eastern European Jews from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, still in widespread use today). Goldberg's translation choice may not have been specifically intended to refer to one of these traditional fast days, but the associations with them are so strong as to be unmistakable for readers. Goldberg could have chosen the more neutral term פאסטן *fastn* 'fasts', which can be used in a variety of contexts and is not the term employed specifically with reference to the minor fasts in the Jewish calendar, but he selected the more targeted טאניסימ *taneysim* instead. As with the terms אוילעמהאזע *oylemhaze* and ווידוי *vide*, the use of טאניסימ *taneysim* in his translation serves to situate the target text within an unambiguously Jewish cultural context, despite its overt adherence to modernising trends in keeping with the Soviet political setting in which it was produced.

A fourth term laden with distinctively Jewish associations is found in Act 1, Scene 3, in Goldberg's translation of the source text's 'breeding' (1.3.238²⁶), referring to Desdemona's high station. In Goldberg's version, 'breeding' is rendered as ייכעס *yikhes* (more commonly referred to in English as *yichus*). *Yichus* is a Yiddish term which is typically translated as 'pedigree', but which has a much more complex and specific meaning, denoting the prestige (or lack thereof) of Jewish individuals and families based on their ancestry. In traditional Eastern European Jewish society, those who were descended from prominent rabbinical dynasties, outstanding Talmudic scholars, or particularly prosperous families were considered to have good *yichus*, while those who came from poor or uneducated families had bad *yichus*. Individuals with good *yichus* benefitted from considerable advantages within the Jewish community, such as high status and eligibility for the most sought-after marriage matches; by contrast, it was difficult for those with bad *yichus* to improve their family prestige except through gaining a reputation as outstanding Talmudic scholars (Bastomsky; Freeze). The centrality of *yichus* within Jewish society continued into the twentieth century in czarist Russia (Freeze) and as such would have been intimately familiar to readers of Goldberg's *Othello*, despite the fact that the concept of family prestige had been officially eradicated under Soviet policies. Thus, while Goldberg selected the term as a culturally neutral equivalent of the source text's 'breeding' and presumably did not intend to suggest a Jewish background for Desdemona, his translation choice has the effect of imbuing the target text with a particularly Jewish cultural resonance. This is especially noteworthy since the Jewish cultural concept of *yichus* as inherited prestige stands in marked contrast to Soviet policies of equality and a classless society of workers.

Goldberg's inclusion of these specific Jewish cultural elements marks a deviation from the predominantly foreignising model that he follows, e.g. by

²⁶This line number is the same in Clark and Wright.

retaining original personal names, toponyms, and references to Christianity and to Greek and Roman mythology, and by avoiding citations of biblical verses and other overt signifiers of Jewishness. His decision to insert these few words, which are replete with Jewish associations but would be unlikely to catch the eye of a casual reader (or, indeed, of a state censor), may suggest a desire to conceal hints of a more traditional Jewish perspective within a text that is overtly in keeping with modernising and culturally neutral Soviet sensibilities.

Dynamic/Functional Equivalence with Eastern European Jewish Realia

Goldberg's covert domesticating tendencies are not limited to references to Jewish religious and cultural traditions. In some cases, they instead concern the replacement of concepts relating to material culture with equivalents more familiar to Eastern European Jews. This reflects a translation strategy which Nida (159–80) and Nida and Taber term 'dynamic equivalence' (or, later, 'functional equivalence'; see Nida and de Waard), whereby rather than translating a culturally specific term in the source text with its formal, i.e. literal, counterpart in the target language which would perhaps be difficult for the target audience to relate to, s/he instead selects a different term which fills the same functional role in the target language. While these types of choices do not have the effect of infusing Goldberg's work with anti-Soviet elements of the Jewish religious tradition in the way that the cases discussed in 3.4.1 and 3.4.2 do, they nevertheless serve further to underscore the unmistakably Jewish cultural context of the Yiddish translation, in contrast to its overtly modernising elements.

An example of dynamic equivalence in Goldberg's translation is his version of 'To change the cod's head for the salmon's tail' (2.1.158²⁷), which he renders (39) as follows:

א קעפל פונ א הערינג אפ א לאקסנעק [...]

[...] *a kepl fun a hering af a laksnek*

'a herring's head for a salmon's tail'

While cod was not a commonly eaten fish among Eastern European Jews, herring was a traditional staple that was cheaper and more readily available than other types of fish; this is witnessed in the many Yiddish proverbs and songs referring to herring as a poor person's food (for example the folksong *Lomir ale zingen a zemerl* 'let's all sing a little song', which refers to herring being the fish of paupers; see YIVO Institute for Jewish Research). Goldberg opts to substitute the relatively unfamiliar cod, which was not a staple of Eastern European Jewish cooking (see Roden 43–46) with the easily relatable

²⁷2.1.154 in Clark and Wright.

herring as a signifier of a cheap and low-value fish for his Eastern European Jewish readership. He adds an endnote to this line (149, n. 16) in which he comments on his domesticating decision, noting that his ‘herring’ equates to the original שטאָקפּיש *shtokfish* ‘cod’, and explaining that this type of fish is worthless (like herring in Eastern Europe).

A similar case concerns the translation of Iago’s reference to ‘small beer’ (2.1.163²⁸). Goldberg (39) renders this as *בעבעלעך און ריבן* *bebelekh un ribn* ‘beans and turnips’. He adds an endnote to this line (149, n. 17), in which he explains that the original equivalent of his translation is *שיטערן ביר* *shitern bir* ‘weak beer’, adding that this means *קלייניקייטן* *kleynikaytn* ‘trivial things’. Beer was not a staple amongst Eastern European Jews in the nineteenth or early twentieth century, in contrast to foods such as beans and turnips, which were widespread and formed a key component of Jewish cuisine due to their low cost and availability (see Yeivin et al. 118); moreover, beans comprise a central element of the traditional Sabbath afternoon meal *cholent* (Rodon 127). As such, Goldberg seems to have felt that a replacement for the reference to beer would better convey the sense of the line to his target audience.

Conclusion

This article has shown that Goldberg’s Yiddish translation of *Othello* exhibits a number of noteworthy characteristics reflecting the specific cultural context of Jewish life in the early Soviet Union, which manifests itself in a tension between modernising Soviet ideology and traditional Eastern European Jewish elements. Goldberg’s adoption of a modernising, and particularly Soviet, stance is evident in the fact that his translation consists of a simple, contemporary Yiddish printed in Soviet orthography with few complex wordplays; as such, it is clearly designed for a Soviet Jewish readership (and potentially theatregoing audience) and reflects the expressed secular, proletarian, and universalist policies of the Soviet authorities. Likewise, it is devoid of citations from Jewish textual sources such as the Hebrew Bible, the Mishnah, the Talmud, and medieval and early modern commentators. As such, Goldberg’s translation breaks with a longstanding Yiddish literary tradition while keeping in line with the early Soviet secularisation drive. Finally, Goldberg’s explicitly positive description of Desdemona as a courageous, progressive modern woman who is not satisfied with the restrictive nature of traditional women’s roles reflects adherence to Soviet ideals of gender equality, while going against the longstanding Jewish institution of arranged marriages and its patriarchal culture.

Despite this overtly modernising Soviet framework, nevertheless certain more subtle but explicitly Jewish cultural elements can be observed in Goldberg’s translation. These include the inclusion of specific individual lexical

²⁸2.1.159 in Clark and Wright.

items such as אוילעמהאזע *oylemhaze* ‘the Present World’, ווידיי *vide* ‘deathbed confession’, and ייכעס *yikhes* ‘ancestral pedigree’, which have strong Jewish religious and cultural connotations, as well as the substitution of certain quotidian elements of Shakespeare’s play, such as cod and beer, with Eastern European Jewish dynamic equivalents, such as herring, beans, and turnips. Goldberg’s Yiddish *Othello* thus reveals to us a perspective on the play which is unmistakably the product of these two conflicting political and cultural perspectives, the early Soviet one and the traditional Eastern European Jewish one. The translation, which reflects the tension between these two conflicting elements, thus bears the indelible stamp of a singular period in Jewish history while also constituting an intriguing case study of a Shakespeare play rendered into the everyday language of an ethnic and religious minority.

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