

Episode 9: “The Book of Bovo” Transcription

We hear a selection from the original text in Yiddish, and then overlapping voices:

Actor 1: A long time ago, there lived in Lombardy —

Actor 2: ...The king looked him over from top to bottom and then had him trot up and down —

Actor 3: ...and so she set off for the city, riding faster than an arrow —

Actor 4: ...so that they might seize and bind Bovo —

Actor 5:...she shouted out to them, and when the sailor saw —

Actor 6: ...and as I held him in my arms, the spirit left him —

Actor 7: ...take everything you want and do not suppose I'll deny you anything.



Host Aaron Henne: Welcome to *The Dybbukast*, the show in which we ask: What do poems, plays, and other creative texts from throughout history tell us about the times in which they were written, and what do they reveal about the forces still at play in our contemporary societies? I'm Aaron Henne, Artistic Director of theatre dybbuk.

I should mention that with this episode, we conclude the first season of *The Dybbukast*. Season Two will launch in November 2021. We decided to bring this season to a close by presenting a special, three-part episode called “The Book of Bovo,” a version of which was originally presented in collaboration with the podcast *Judaism Unbound*, and was our first experiment with podcasting prior to starting our own show, *The Dybbukast*. We have now re-edited what was formerly a three-episode series and are happy to share the new, single-episode version with you here.

In “The Book of Bovo,” we will take you on a journey through *Bovo-Buch*, a 16th century, Yiddish chivalric romance. Chivalric romances are narratives which were popular in the aristocratic circles of high medieval and early modern Europe. They most often featured the adventures of heroic knights going on quests. They also tended to celebrate a certain brand of civilized behavior, with an emphasis on love and courtly manners. While we won't get into every twist and turn of the book's plot, especially since it's really riffing on some familiar tropes, *Bovo-Buch*, as you will hear, adopted and adapted this form to its own purposes.

Along the way, we are joined by Dr. Erith Jaffe-Berg, Professor of Theatre at the Department of Theatre, Film and Digital Production at the University of California, Riverside, who you last heard in episode 8, “In Defense of Women.” She will discuss the ways in which *Bovo-Buch* speaks to the cultural and social forces of its time.

You've already heard a compilation of lines from Jerry C. Smith's English translation of *Bovo-Buch*. A variety of actors from theatre dybbuk will read selections from the story, and Joshua Wolf Coleman will read the part of the author, Elia Levita, throughout the episode.

And now, The Book of Bovo. Part One: Story and Society.



We hear a selection from the original text in Yiddish, and then:

Actor 2: *And so, finally, at long last, I will begin with this book called Bovo. It has been 34 years now since I first wrote it.*

Aaron: Erith, thank you for joining me. I look forward to talking about *Bovo-Buch*.

Dr. Erith Jaffe-Berg: Thank you so much, Aaron. This is a chivalric romance, written in Yiddish, by a man named Elia Levita. It was written in 1507, and then it was published in 1541. In its day, it was a very popular book and received many re-printings. And I would say that it should be considered - it is considered - a treasure of Yiddish literature and of early modern culture. I should add that it was not a totally original book. For example, there was the Anglo-Norman *Bevis of Hampton*, who was translated to the Italian *Buovo d'Antona*, which then inspired *Bovo-Buch*.

Actor 2: *I based it on an Italian book, but I have added much that is my own. Whoever reads my book will understand it, although there are a few Italian words in it. If anyone does not recognize them, let him look at the very last pages of this book where I have listed these words in alphabetical order and briefly define them.*

I sing this story to an Italian melody, but I cannot describe it for you. Someone who knows music in the scales would have to do that, or, for that matter, write a better tune for it. He would have my thanks.

Erith: So from the get-go, this is a book, or a chivalric romance, that reflects on many different cultures. It reads like a wild adventure story, with some bizarre references to Jewish culture and Yiddish thrown in.

It seems naturally theatrical to me. How important and alive the act of reading aloud must have been to the early modern people, when not everyone had access to court theatre, and not everyone could go to performances in the piazza all the time.

Actor 2: *A long time ago, there lived in Lombardy a most noble count without equal far and wide. Count Guidon was the good man's name, a strong warrior tested in battle. For many years, he had reigned in the city of Antona, and now he had reached the age of 60. The book tells us that the high born count had remained unmarried all his life, and that he had nothing to do with women.*

Actor 6: *But then he reached that age when the more he covered himself up, the colder he got. Nothing seemed to warm him, and he acted as though he were freezing to death. His wise knights gave him counsel —*

Actor 4: *Gracious Lord, have your people go out and find you some hot, young wench who will warm you and take care of you.*

Actor 6: *Better for him had he lain alone longer. It was a daughter of the Count of Burgundy who was given to him in marriage. She had no equal between here and Babylon. She was as high born as he, and she pleased him well. Her name was Brandonia the Fair. With him, she led a life of luxury, and whatever she desired was granted her. Her days were pleasant, her nights distressing. She warmed him in a fine fashion. If I told you more than that, I would bring disgrace upon myself.*

Erith: So in *Bovo-Buch*, our main hero is named, not surprisingly, Bovo. And he is described, interestingly, as a very beautiful boy. And the fact that he's so handsome is something that is emphasized in the narration again and again.

Actor 6: *Fair Brandonia became pregnant. And through the grace of God, bore a son. No one had ever beheld a more beautiful or a more comely child. They named him Bovo.*

Erith: He's born to the nobility, which, of course, might already raise an eyebrow because — hold on a second — this is a tale in Yiddish about Bovo. And, you know, he can't really be a lord — a Jewish lord — at this time. So it's an example of how the original story, written in a Christian context, is overlaid onto a Jewish context. And sometimes in that cultural translation process, improbabilities appear.

Aaron: Right. For example, Bovo, this lord who is Jewish, is essentially raised by a baron.

Actor 6: *After a time, Count Guidon asked one of his barons to take the boy into his care and to be a proper guardian for him. The baron, whose name was Sinibald, gladly complied. He was the lord of San Simon, a mighty castle built on a high hill in the midst of a forest some 10 miles from Antona. The count said to Sinibald —*

Actor 4: *Take my son and have your wife look after him. See that he's taken care of in every way. And when he cries, have someone sing to him.*

Actor 6: *Sinibald took the young lord and brought him to San Simon, to his wife. She gladly cared for Bovo but soon, she no longer knew what to do with him, for he grew up very quickly. As a boy of 10 he already had a grown man's body. Sinibald taught him to fence, to thrust and to parry, and also how to joust. He was full of wild notions, pretending to harbor, kill, and slay everyone. Now and then, he and four or five squires would go out riding and come visit his mother, but he gave her little joy, and she showed him no affection. She hated him, because he was his father's son.*

Erith: Brandonia, who's married to a much older man whom it's clear she does not love, contrives, of course, to have her husband killed.

Actor 6: *“Oy vey, alas, woe is me. Such heartfelt sorrow. My mother and father have done this to me. May God give them both the hilekh. How could they have been so cruel to give me to that old fart? But I swear, I'll not waste my life with him growing old and ugly. Whatever it takes, I'll find a way to get myself some fine young man. One who will pass the time with me as I please.”*

Now Brandonia had a courtier by the name of Ricardo, a man most skilled in evil. One day, she called him to her chambers, those which the good count had built for her, and said, “If you promise not to betray me, I'll entrust you with a matter of great importance and I'll give you a thousand ducats as well. If you refuse me, you'll be sorry. I'll scream that you tried to rape me and have you killed on the spot.”

Ricardo said —

Actor 4: *Gracious lady, why threaten me so? You know there's nothing I wouldn't do for you if you but ask.*

Aaron: And of course, the killing of Count Guidon is really what sets Bovo's story on its path.

Erith: She fears that her son Bovo will eventually avenge his father's murder. So, very un-Jewish motherly-like, she contrives to have Bovo killed. This is a horrific idea to any — you know, to anybody. But it goes against every maternal instinct, of course.

Actor 6: *The chambermaid took the food and quickly brought it to the boy. When she unlocked the room, she saw him sitting there, too weak to stand, barely able to speak. When he came over to her, he had to crawl along the wall. He really was at death's door. He grabbed the chicken with both hands, and was about to stuff some into his mouth. The chambermaid immediately knelt down beside him. She loved him as his father's child, and said, "Dear son, listen closely to me. As you value your life, don't eat a bite. Your mother is trying to kill you. She has poisoned this chicken for you. And if you eat it, something terrible will happen to you."*

Now, the story has it that a little dog had slipped into the room when the chambermaid had opened the door. Weeping with fear for the boy, she said to him, "If you don't believe me, then see for yourself."

With that, she sliced off a piece of the chicken and gave it to the dog. And before it could so much as gulp it down, it swelled up and died. As soon as Bovo saw this, he beat his breast and tore his hair.

Actor 4: *Oy vey, what is to become of me? How can I save myself? If I go out, someone is sure to recognize me.*

Actor 6: *Nonetheless, he decided to try to make his escape through the town. He started running as fast as he could, rushing through the crowds, and dashing headlong through all the mud and filth.*

Erith: He sets off on a journey that's going to take him across Europe and even much beyond Europe over the course of the tale. The plot is copious. It's sort of endless — endless characters come into his life, endless near-death experiences, endless forests, endless landscapes, endless adventures, twists, turns, and of course, there's romance.

Aaron: And the romance is also interrupted at times by some of these endless characters who then have to be dealt with.

Actor 6: *While she was standing there, kissing him on his red mouth, with both arms around him, someone came into the stables. In his hands, he was carrying the king's banner on a staff. His name was Duke Oglin, the king's cousin, and he had seen everything. He said —*

Actor 4: *Drusiana, what is the meaning of this outrageous behavior? One would think you're a whore. Indeed, I think you're well on your way to becoming one. Believe me, I'll find some way of punishing this lechery. I'll make you wish you'd never been born. The enemy has captured your father and are threatening to retsekh him. And you stand there, carrying on with a servant boy. Are you not in the least*

dismayed at what has happened to your father? Stop giving me that steely look. May the deaver strike you down.

Actor 6: *He went on cursing and scolding in this fashion until Bovo had finally had enough of it. He said*

—

Actor 4: *Oh, stop your prattle.*

Actor 6: — *and with his fist struck him a mighty blow on the head. He felt it in every bone of his body and fell down so hard he bounced. Then he got up and ran away, leaving the king's banner behind. Drusiana quickly picked it up while Bovo dashed out of the stables. She watched him go, and she sent her best prayers with him.*

Aaron: Now that we've learned some about the book and its plot, I'd love to hear about the author and how his background may have influenced the work.

Erith: So Elia Levita's full Jewish name was Elia Levita ben Asher Ashkenazi. He was born in 1469. Like his name suggests - Ashkenazi; in the regions of Ashkenaz - in a town close to Nuremberg. And then he moved to Italy, as many people from the Germanic lands did. It was one of the few places where Jews could actually find some kind of protection and thrive. So he dies in Venice in 1549. A relatively long life, for this period of time.

He was known as Elia Bokher which as the researcher and the scholar Claudia Rosenzweig beautifully suggests in her book commentary on *Bovo-Buch* — she suggests that the term *bokher*, which usually means young man or young student, in this case could also be said to mean, and I'm quoting from her, “a wandering intellectual, or a scholar whose shifting circumstances ruled out the possibility of a stable position in the Jewish community.” I think that's very interesting, this kind of wandering identity, even within the Jewish identity, which says something about a man who was attracted to a story about a wandering soul.

Actor 6: *No one had ever ridden faster than Bovo, this fine warrior. He rushed past many a town but entered not a single one for he would let nothing slow him down.*

Erith: He was famous for being a grammarian, who taught Hebrew to Christian thinkers. And at this time, there were many what we call Christian Hebraists, people who were Christian, but who were very interested in Hebraic texts. So he was teaching to Christian thinkers such as Egidio da Viterbo in Rome, and Georges de Selve in Venice, as well also as the French king, Francois the First, who actually was very interested in having Elia Levita come to France and teach him. But Levita refused the offer, because he knew that the Jews had been expelled from France, you know, in 1394. He would have been, if not the only Jew, one of the few Jews living openly as a Jew at the time there. It's also interesting that he writes especially to appeal to women in the Jewish community, who may not otherwise have benefited from his publications and works as a grammarian because they may not have been as conversant in Hebrew. But here he's writing a work that is very deliberately written in Yiddish, and clearly the women - the Ashkenazi, the Tedeschi whose families were from Germanic lands - would have found it much more accessible to hear a story in Yiddish.

Actor 2: *May His holy name give me the strength to complete this Yiddish rendering of an Italian tale. May He help me succeed so that no one laughs at my efforts.*

Erith: We have the Ashkenazi Jews coming from the Germanic lands, who were called Tedeschi, because Tedesco means “German” in Italian. And they had migrated during the Middle Ages. And when I’m talking about the Jews living in the Italian peninsula, it’s really important to note that they themselves are very diverse. Some of them are coming from Spain, the Ponentine Jews. Some of them are coming from the Levant, known as Levantini. Others are also coming from Italy and had been living there as far back, as I said, in Roman times. And so this is a very multicultural world within the communities of Northern Italian Jews. And of course, that multiculturalism then finds expression in the literature at the time.

My own work, I’ll share, for the last about 10, 15 years has focused on looking at minority communities working in early modern Italy, and especially focused on the Jews. The Jews were relegated in a kind of denigrating way perhaps to the title of *Ebrae*, “Jews”. So, yes, their writers were acknowledged as writers, but their contribution is being offered from a position of marginality and deference, as well as difference.

In our own way of thinking of cultures and races maybe, we can think of separate but not equal. David Ruderman and Giuseppe Veltri have an edited book that’s called *Cultural Intermediaries* about the Jewish intellectuals such as Levita who are living at this time. And they emphasize the importance and the high degree of the cultural exchanges that were taking place that indicate both an enormous amount of cultural exposure to one another, but also, of course, as we see, the complexities of this exposure, which is always done on a level that is not totally even.

Here we’ve got the hero who was initially a Christian hero grafted onto a Yiddish identity. That’s not an easy leap to make, right? A man who curses, uses such terms as *hilekh*, or “diarrhea” in Yiddish, and groans, “oy vey,” but, to all intents and purposes, otherwise functions as a Christian hero would. So there are *khasesnes* that are being performed here, weddings, and there’s *mazel*, or luck, that’s being wished. Bovo’s boys are given a bris, which is kind of shocking. I mean, where do you have a circumcision in a Christian chivalric romance? So, the Jewish references are sprinkled everywhere, right? But fundamentally, the story remains the Christian heroic journey.

Actor 6: *Everyone took off their hats to him, shook his hand and said —*

Actor 4: *Mazel Tov! Congratulations!*

Actor 6: *But Duke Oglin, that villain, said to himself, as soon as he heard about this —*

Actor 4: *May the hilekh take me if this marriage should ever come to pass. Yesterday, he struck me and I had to run away. I’ll surely not forgive him that today.*

Actor 6: *Then with his head all in bandages and his arm in a sling, he forced his way into the king’s room. Duke Oglin greeted him and said —*

Actor 4: *Praise be to Him who has caused those who were a captive to be freed. But tell me, dear cousin mine, what’s all this about a khasene? I cannot wish you much mazel for truly you have arranged an extremely poor khasene. Who in his whole life has ever heard of a greater shame and disgrace than that a king should give his daughter to a runaway knave from God knows where?*

Actor 6: *The king said —*

Actor 4: *Now heed me well. Your words displease me. How dare you speak to me so harshly? This should be no concern of yours. I've been looking for a good husband for Drusiana for some time. And now I happen to have found one. What do I care for some neighboring king's son who doesn't know me from fe? Do not our own sages tell us that one should look for goodness in a son-in-law? For of what value is the yichus that one has from one's father and mother if he himself is not a good person?*

Erith: What happens in Elia Levita's hands is that the story becomes a kind of universalized story. And its particulars have a Jewish-Yiddish flavoring here. So there's a lot of irony when we meet those moments, right, because it seems so improbable that any knight would pray to the *Boyre*, right, to the "Creator God," in Yiddish, and that anybody who is noble would talk about *tokheses*, you know, tushies or behinds. It is a very jarring mixture of high and low and improbable. There's so much irony overlaid, because it's so ridiculous to a Jewish ear to hear those particular expressions said in these moments of high intense tension in the text.

Aaron: So given the ways in which Levita is dealing with these complexities of identity, can you also share with us about the book's relationship to the particulars of costuming or dress and what that may reveal?

Erith: There is a lot of emphasis on clothing and identity. And that may be speaking to the fact that the Jews do have to, first of all, wear a marker and a badge of difference on them, and so they're very aware — keenly aware — of the ways in which, literally, clothing marks you. Bovo himself, I should say, makes us even more aware of it because in his escapes and escapades, he takes on a lot of different costumes. And sometimes he's dressed as almost a peasant. I also want to say that there's another level, I think, in which clothing and identity are important in this tale, and that is in that the Jewish readership would have been very knowledgeable. One of the ways in which they could make a living was through the *strazzaria*, through the secondhand cloth industry, and pawn brokering and money lending and loans oftentimes involve pawning important and expensive items, and clothing was one such very expensive item at the time.

Actor 6: *As soon as the king got out of bed that morning, he ordered splendid clothes brought for Bovo — a precious gold necklace, and a black silk cloak. Thus dressed, he walked through the town attended by many servants.*

Erith: His love interest, Drusiana, is described as wearing clothing of gold and pearls, and you could almost sense the detail there as speaking to an audience among whom were people who were very, very conversant in this.

Actor 6: *Then Bovo went over to the hall and watched the dancing for a while, looking all around for Drusiana. When he saw her, she was wearing gold and countless pearls, and a gown made entirely of golden cloth.*

Erith: I've spent some time in the state archives of Mantua, and I've seen the receipts detailing the beautiful exchanges of filigreed fabric — metallic work also — that are described as being done by members of the Jewish community in Mantua and elsewhere, and are being actually purchased in many cases by the Christian nobility.

This text also, it seems to me, is very very filled with copious mentioning of food, especially later in the text when the female characters become more dominant, and where food at parties, wedding celebrations, events is described in a great deal of detail. And I just will mention for the moment that nowhere in that detail is pork, or *hazhel*, mentioned at all. Nothing *treyf* finds its way into the menu. And you know, you'd kind of expect in a Christian tale that there would be, you know, something cooking on the spittle that's not kosher. But here, that is excised. And instead you have many more familiar types of food that find their way into the story, in the narrative.

Aaron: We touched on this a little bit already, but what function does this bringing of some Jewish elements or perspectives into a traditionally Christian narrative or structure serve?

Erith: There's a way in which, for the reader, it seems to me there is something aspirational and imaginative fantasy that is happening in this work. It's similar, I think, to when we had — you know, now we have color conscious casting, right, or race consciousness in the way in which we cast. But in the 90s, it was very common to say, "colorblind casting". And in that regard, if you chose a person of color to play a dominant role — it's a little bit like what *Hamilton* was so successful in doing. If you imagine people in positions of authority and power, but the actors' bodies are actually people who are otherwise marginalized by culture, then you're participating in a kind of cultural intervention.



Aaron: Now that we've learned about the book and the world in which it was created, in the second part of this episode, we will investigate the role of women in *Bovo-Buch* and how the book speaks to their position in the surrounding culture.

The Book of Bovo, Part Two: The Women and Their World

Actor 3: *Now the high born king had a beautiful 18-year-old daughter. No man nor woman ever had a finer figure or a more splendid body. Her eyes were like two flashing garnets. She was indescribably lovely. People called her Drusiana the Fair. One day, she saw Bovo riding across the square and she noticed how well he rode his horse. He could use his spurs to make it jump three feet off the ground. The whole town was looking at him. The noble maiden said to her ladies-in-waiting, "May I fall down out of this window if in all my life I ever saw a more handsome fellow."*

And then she thought to herself, "Oh God, isn't he the most beautiful boy. What money and possessions I'd give to have a husband like that. His beauty has made me sick with desire but if he were here at my side, he'd cure me soon enough. If I don't see him again, I don't know what I'll do."

Aaron: Erith, can you give us some context, in terms of women's role, or roles, in society, especially in Europe, during this time period?

Erith: I was thinking about gender and gender dynamics in the early modern Italian and early modern European context. I mean, we know there were queens, right — Queen Elizabeth, Queen Henrietta Maria, queens in France, queens in Spain, queens in England — who were doing a formidable job leading their country. And yet, the reality of most people, really, was that women didn't really have as much social and political power as men. And in some cases, they had less than they would have had in the medieval and feudal system, for a combination of reasons. And this, of course, should be nuanced. It's not like this was globally true of everyone but, in general. So we look to places such as Venice or Italy to

find those exceptions. And for example, in Venice, of course, there were these women who worked as courtesans, who were learned women and had more power than the average woman, but of course, oftentimes used sex and sexuality in order to gain that power. And of course, there were many learned daughters of scholars living throughout Europe, and they did receive an education but they were, on the whole, exceptions to the rule. Lower class, working women were forced to work so they did participate in the economy, but they didn't really have an active social and political role.

Now let's turn it a little bit closer to *Bovo-Buch*. There we see that the gender dynamics and the representation of women are also reflective somewhat of this larger reality around us. So, the first woman character we're presented with is Brandonia, right. This is Bovo's mom. She's a wicked woman in many many ways, but she's one who follows her own heart, which is very interesting. So she's a little bit unusual in that sense. Our next heroine that we meet in *Bovo-Buch* is Drusiana, an equally unusual character that doesn't perform the role of an obedient daughter quite as well as maybe we would have assumed. So here she is, a beautiful girl. She's described as being about 18 years old, the daughter of King Erminio of Armonia. And when she first appears, she's described as Drusiana the Fair. We have this idea of her as pretty and also demure, but the moment she sees this guy Bovo, she throws caution to the wind and is swayed by her own desire rather than her father's desire that she should marry, you know, somebody else, and she pursues her desire.

Actor 3: *Drusiana sighed and looked at him with loving eyes. Her heart was burning for him. And she had decided to woo him.*

Erith: And then sex and love don't end with Drusiana because Bovo's travels take him to a fictionalized version of Bavl, or Babylonia, and there he meets a Muslim woman and she's the sultan's daughter and this is Margretha, also described in the text, by the way, as Margretha the Fair, and, of course, she falls in love with him. They all do.

Actor 3: *Now, the sultan had a daughter called Margretha the Fair. She had not been in the city when all this was happening. Rather, she and her attendants had set out that morning and had spent the entire day hunting. It was evening now. And as she was riding homeward, she saw many men in the distance. She rode over to them and saw the handsome lad in their midst. She looked at him, marveled greatly, and said, "What a pity it would be if he should be hanged. I'll go see if I can't do something to save his life".*

And so she set off for the city, riding faster than an arrow from the bowstring. She dismounted, ran up to her father and threw herself at his feet. He said —

Actor 7: *Arise, and you shall have whatever it is you desire.*

Actor 3: *Margretha said, "For what reason are you having that worthy youth killed?" The Sultan said —*

Actor 7: *Shall I tell you. Alas, this is the very man who struck your brother dead.*

Actor 3: *"If he struck my brother dead, then he must be a mighty warrior indeed. Who knows? Maybe my brother brought it upon himself. This one most likely had to fight to defend himself and manage to win. Dear father, listen to me. Let it be for now. In return, I promise you that I'll use all my wit and cunning to get him to renounce his own religion and accept ours."*

The Sultan said —

Actor 7: *if he does that, then for your sake, I'll let him live.*

Actor 3: *Margretha rejoiced and quickly dashed away, intent on saving Bovo's life.*

Erith: In an echo of Pharaoh's daughter who saves baby Moses, she saves young Bovo, who's imprisoned by her father, and she turns her back on her father — Medea-like, right? — and is willing to betray her father and her family and her homeland for love. Drusiana and Margretha — you can think of them as daughters who are disobedient, and wives, and, you know, they are supposed to be governed by the will of the men in their lives, but they take matters into their own hands in this narrative. You have no demure women, and women play a very central function in this narrative all throughout.

We have to keep in mind that of course Elia Levita writes in his foreword that he's writing this for women readers to have something to do on Shabbas, and on Yontif, you know, on these holidays where you're not supposed to be writing, you're not supposed to be doing any work. So perhaps he is appealing to his readership in creating these strong, willful female characters. Perhaps this is a bit of a case of wish fulfillment, allowing women to have an outlet which maybe they otherwise wouldn't.

Actor 2: *I, Elia Levy, the writer, humble servant of all pious women, am troubled that several ladies counted ill of me that I have not published some of my Yiddish books for them so that they might read them on the Sabbath and on holidays and thus amuse themselves. Indeed, it does seem right and proper that I should now do this since I've already composed, published and sent out into the world eight or nine books in the holy language.*

Aaron: I find it fascinating that Levita recognizes this opportunity to appeal to women, reaching those who would likely not otherwise engage with his other pieces of writing.

Erith: And that's interesting also to think about in terms of potentially the roles that women played in the Italian community, which was, as we already discussed, a very heterogeneous Jewish community composed both of Ashkenazim, but also Sephardim and also of Italiani, and where women took a role in the businesses that their husbands and that their fathers handled. And sometimes in the wills of these men, you see that they're leaving their businesses not to sons, but sometimes to daughters and sometimes to widows, and that is very interesting. So there were a lot of very able women working in the Jewish Italian community. And Levita may have been very aware of the fact that that's the kind of woman he's writing for.

Actor 3: *One day, about half a year later, as Bovo was sitting playing chess with Sinibald, a letter arrived. In it, the fair Margretha had written to him of many remarkable events. Her father, the sultan, had died, and she was now all alone. The Lord Pashamont had almost driven her from her lands and was causing her unimaginable sorrows. He also wanted her to be his wife. She had heard of how things had gone well for Bovo, and hoped that he would now share his good fortune with her and help her out of her distress. She would but remind him of the kindness and devotion she had shown to him when he had been imprisoned in her father's dungeon.*

Erith: Howard Adelman, who's written about the question of literacy of Jewish women in early modern Italian communities — he shows that there were ambivalent attitudes towards women and women reading, and he points to the Bible, right, and in the Bible, you know, we're told that you should teach

the commandments to your *benecha*. Okay, *benecha*, is that “sons” specifically? Or is that *benecha*, “your children”? So already from the beginning, you have this kind of ambivalence. And then if we look historically at what's going on on the ground, you see that ambivalence absolutely reflected in terms of people that we know who had literacy, and people who probably did not. So, knowledge and literacy were connected to female promiscuity. So if you can read, you become a little more dangerous, because who knows what you can read and, you know, who knows where that'll take you? And assimilation, as we know, is already an issue and a factor, and women have such an important role, especially, in terms of Judaism and in terms of the *Halakha*, because if your mother is Jewish, you are considered Jewish. And so it's very important to preserve that connection for women and their religion. Drusiana and Bovo always identify as Jews. Drusiana hangs even closer to her Jewish identity than Bovo does.

Actor 3: *And as surely as I am a Jew, that handsome lad she has with her is Bovo.*

Erith: She's the one, for example, who insists on a bris for her boys.

Actor 3: *Then Drusiana mounted a horse and left the square, riding behind her father. When the children were brought to her later, she said, “They haven't been circumcised yet.”*

The king said —

Actor 7: *Never fear. I'll arrange a fine bris for tomorrow.*

Aaron: As we think about the ways in which *Bovo-Buch* is speaking to women and their Jewish identities, I'm curious about those identities and their relationships to, and understanding of, various Jewish texts.

Erith: Adelman himself notes that there were women who were in charge of the education also of young men in the family. One presumes that they were also reading all kinds of texts as they were doing that. And there were women who read the Bible and who even led services for other women. You know, how rampant was this? What were the percentages? It seems like there was a real spectrum of possibilities. Now, Chava Turniansky and Erika Timm have this important book about Yiddish texts, *(Yiddish) In Italia*. And in that book, you have a series of re-publications of colophons. Colophons are title pages — pages of text — where you refer to the publisher. And in these colophons from different books, you have a lot of Yiddish texts published in Italy, and read by Italian Jewish women, that were dedicated specifically to women of the 15- and 1600s. For example, you have a book called *Seder Nashim*, a book in which we have all kinds of commandments for women, things that women should do. You have also books of *minhagim* — *minhagim* are customs books — and these are written in Yiddish. So presumably they're written for somebody to read, right?

So to return to *Bovo-Buch*, interestingly, when I was reading and rereading this text, I was noting to myself all of the issues that I would connect with women's issues — child rearing and child birth and food preparation and food in general. So, when you get to the point in the narrative in which Drusiana has given birth, it's interesting that she's nurtured not necessarily by Bovo, but by this half-dog, half-man creature, Pelukan, and Pelukan sets out to find food for Drusiana and her new babies, and the birth sequence in fact actually underscores the role — the active role — the Pelukan takes in midwifing.

Actor 3: *In the distance, they saw a beautiful forest. They rode into it and soon dismounted. Pelukan quickly cut some branches and made a little hut on the ground. Drusiana's pain started coming more quickly, and the longer they went on, the worse it got for her.*

Actor 7: *She wept bitterly and said, “Oy vey, what shall become of me without a midwife? Oy vey, how can I have a child by myself? How shall I take care of myself? Most Holy, I have none of those things which a woman in confinement must have.”*

Pelukan said —

Actor 3: *Dear child, don't cry. You have me and Bovo, the handsome lad. He'll hold your back, and I'll pull the child out for you.*

Actor 7: *Just as she started to lie down, a pretty baby came out. Pelukan had to play the role of midwife and receive the child. And so she had a fine, pretty son; a large one, a stout one, a long one.*

But then she cried, “Oy vey! I'm going to have more. I think there's still another one stuck inside me.”

And no sooner had she said the words when she had another pretty lad.

Erith: When he finds food for them, he finds it in a monastery. And the food that he describes would do really well in a cooking show. I mean, it's mouthwatering kind of food — rice and wheat, he says, and he's taking *simukim*, little raisins and grapes. And he's taking spices. I mean, a readership of men — would that really be that interesting for them at this time? Chefs today who are men? Yes, absolutely. But early modern men who are probably not going to find themselves cooking for their family? I don't think so. But a woman readership could already start to imagine what kinds of things you could cook with those.

Actor 7: *He gathered all this in a heap, and then he took all manner of kitchen utensils — platters, spoons, plates, a pot or two like those you pay three hellers for, and a pan for cooking eggs in. Then he went down into the cellar and drew off two large bottles of wine. He also took with him a bucket in which to wash the baby's diapers.*

Erith: In addition to emphasizing the meals, I want to say that the nursing — early child care — runs several pages in the book. I mean, it's not just one sentence. It's several pages of this.

Actor 7: *The next morning, she quickly got up and ran around the hut like a mad woman gathering up all the children's things. She sucked two fresh eggs, nursed the babies and then tied one onto her back and took the other in her arms.*

She said, “God have mercy. Why didn't I do as my father and mother said, those fine worthy people?”

Erith: Now, I want to turn to another aspect. I think there's a lot about female interiority in this text, the emotional landscape of your inner thoughts, of your changing ideas, of your moods. And I think this is very evident with Drusiana. This is called *Bovo-Buch*. We're supposed to be focusing on Bovo all the time, but we hear quite a lot about Drusiana.

Actor 7: *Let's let Bovo sail many a mile and go his long, long way while I sing to you now of what had been happening in the meantime to the dear Drusiana. When Bovo again failed to appear, Drusiana grew deeply troubled. She went throughout the palace anxiously asking everyone if they knew anything at all, but no one could tell her a thing. Greatly concerned, she could hardly wait until the next day came.*

Then she went to her father and said, "Dear father, help me. Things can't go on like this with Bovo. I'm afraid he's been killed. Please keep silent no longer. Don't take this so lightly. You should make a royal inquiry, heralded by trumpets, asking if anyone has seen him."

Erith: Drusiana at one point is described as melancholic because she senses a premonition of misfortune. That's such a beautiful and nuanced and subtle kind of quality. For people who are in their worlds, doing tasks but in their thoughts, that must have been a commonly shared kind of experience. When you hear the narration about this, there's a lot of sensitivity and an understanding that his female readership — that this might resonate with them. The narrative spends a lot of time also describing how she feels when she grows troubled, and that she feels anxious, and that she's restless, for example; not just actions, but also the interiority.

Actor 7: *When Drusiana saw all this, she began to weep and wail for she feared Bovo was also dead, torn apart by the lions, just like Pelukan.*

She said, "If I wait here, I might be killed as well. The lion is sure to come back, following our scent. Even so, I will wait the rest of this day for Bovo. But if he doesn't come back today, then I'll leave here and go back to my mom and dad."

She wept and carried on pitilessly as she waited for the whole day in the hut with the children.

Aaron: And in addition to giving us this picture of a concerned mother and partner, earlier in the work, as you already alluded to, the author really engages with her sexual desires.

Erith: Elia Levita is not afraid to give us a very lustful picture of a young woman who wants to get physical with this guy. She literally makes eyes at him. But he, of course, remains lovely, cool and unresponsive. And the narrative becomes very comical. You've got this very heated young woman, and this guy who's kind of clueless and doesn't really get it or is not interested in her at all.

Actor 7: *How quickly did Drusiana send for him. When that fine fellow came, she glanced at him lovingly, and looked him all over from head to toe and immediately felt much revived. Then she whispered into his ear, "Thou lovely visage, thou bright star, serve me and wait on my table."*

Actor 3: *"As you wish," said Bovo.*

Actor 7: *Everyone then sat down at the tables and the various courses were brought out, boiled and broiled chicken and fish. But Drusiana ate not a bite during the entire meal. She could not take her eyes off Bovo. The more she longed for him, the worse she felt, and it was not for food that she hungered. Her passion soon became so obvious that everyone in the room noticed it and started saying to one another*

—

Actor 3: *Look how indecently she's carrying on over that runaway stableboy.*

Actor 7: *But Drusiana was determined to fulfill her desire, and so she deliberately dropped her knife so that it fell under the table.*

Actor 3: *Bovo came at once, told the ladies-in-waiting to remain seated, and got down on his hands and knees to look for it.*

Actor 7: *Drusiana immediately bent down and said, "Are you blind? Don't you see it?" And, as he reached under the table for it, she kissed him.*

Actor 3: *Bovo jumped, rubbed his cheek, and was terribly embarrassed when he heard the other shmuesin: "How naughty she dropped that knife on purpose." He was also afraid that the people at the next table had seen everything, and he cast down his eyes and blushed redder than a glowing ember.*

Erith: So, finally, after pages and pages of delayed gratification, she grows so turned on really that she's described as so desperate and wanting him that she contrives a way to find herself in a barn with him alone, right? And the guy lies down — Bovo — and basically tells her, I've got to sleep, I'm exhausted. And she kind of, you know — she really provokes him into action and entices him.

Actor 7: *She spoke most lovingly to him. "Come on. You've slept enough. Sit here next to me, proud warrior." And Bovo thought —*

Actor 3: *What a strange thing to say. And said, "What is it you wish, noble young lady?"*

Actor 7: *She said, "How often these past weeks have I waved and beckoned to you but you've never so much as looked at me. Yet, if I hadn't been at the tournament today, you would have been hacked to bits."*

Actor 3: *Bovo would have gladly gone somewhere else but she held him tightly and wouldn't let him go.*

Actor 7: *She said, "You are my heart's desire. Why do you turn your back on me? If you only knew how fond I am of you, you'd cuddle up closer to me. Oh, why are you so stubborn? You're breaking my heart. I'm really not all that ugly. I do have a nice pair of tits."*

With that, she burst out laughing, bared her two, snow white breasts and said, "Come on now. Don't be so shy. Surely these are not two morsels to be refused."

Erith: But, of course in the text, it takes them a little bit longer until they actually can consummate their attraction.

Actor 3: *Then —*

Actor 7: *for the first time —*

Actors 3 & 7: *They took their pleasure with each other.*

Actor 7: *Drusiana cried out as though she had come upon a thief in the stables, but this thief stabbed her without a struggle for she offered no resistance.*

Actor 3: *I think you know what I mean.*

Erith: There is this way in which the copiousness is halted at a certain point. In other words, the sexual descriptions do not become copious, as opposed to, let's say, the food descriptions, which absolutely do. And that might indicate this place in which, well, we gotta shroud this a little bit, we've got to cool this off a little bit. There's something about the female readership but perhaps also more than just the female readership that is interested in this. Men, of course, are expected not to read anything except books that are concretely more tied to the Bible, or religion, or the Talmud, but one can imagine that there would have been an interest. The fact that rabbis were not happy about the text in various phases is an indication that they were not happy about it for a variety of reasons. One was this idea of promiscuity and female readership, but the other might be that it's not reaching just the female audience.

Actor 3: *The sword, which reached down to his calf, was a most excellent one. It was so sharp, one could have shorn hair with it, or even split a thread. The horse was enchanted, and no weapon could harm it. It was possessed with the devil's own power and could defend itself against 100 men. Now that he was ready, Bovo quickly jumped onto the horse.*

Actor 7: *Drusiana cried and said to him, "Go forth, dear, worthy warrior, and may almighty God go with you, He who did create heaven and earth. Now bend down here to me a little."*

She kissed him on the mouth.

Actor 3: *He kissed her back.*

Erith: As opposed to writers like Ariosto or Aretino at the time, I think the Jewish writers have to be careful, and they have to be cognizant of the fact that, you know, if they've overstepped, if they've been too provocative, that might become problematic. That speaks to a danger that exists, I think, for the Jew in the Renaissance, in this early modern period, for whom, you know, liberties are always a little bit limited. And so there's always the possibility that you could be censored, that you could be punished. And even though that exists, of course, to some extent, for the Christian writer or creator, you have that additional element of living as a marginalized person within a community that exists as others. And so you have an additional layer of challenges that you have to face, I think, at this period.

Aaron: Now since we've talked about power dynamics and marginalization, I can't help but think about this challenging sequence near the end of the piece where a female figure is easily transferred to a different husband.

Erith: So yes, so in the narrative I've talked so much about Drusiana, but there's Margretha the Fair, who is described as of a heathen religion, and she helps him, as we've said already before. While he's with her, he's also reunited at some point in the narrative with Drusiana. Drusiana has kind of fallen away because he was taken and he lost connection with Drusiana. And when he loses the connection with Drusiana, the interesting thing is, that in the narrative, Bovo doesn't lament that. He just forgets, and he moves on to Margretha. And when he's with Margretha, he stipulates that she should convert, right? Early on, when they meet each other, she tells him, convert to my religion and come and live with me and you'll be accepted by Father. He says, absolutely not, I reject it. Later in the narrative, when they meet again, he says to her, well, you want to be with me, you got to convert. And she says, okay, I will convert, which is really interesting, I think.

Actor 3: *Do you remember how I once asked you to accept my religion and how you refused? I'll accept yours now, if you want me for your wife.*

Erith: And she seems to convert very easily, and even her ability to use words shifts immediately, and she starts using Yiddish upon agreeing to convert. They're just about to get married and then Drusiana reappears.

Actor 7: *Margretha was horrified when she heard the Bovo's first wife had returned to him. Unable to utter a word, she fell down as though she were dead. Bovo himself had to revive her. He said —*

Actor 3: *You must accept that which has now come to pass. Put all else out of your mind and let our Lord God's will be done, as our elders have decreed one must do. But listen, while I suggest something which will preserve your honor and ensure you a good and happy life. Let me give my comrade, Tiritz, to you. He is just as good a man for you as I. He's certainly no husband to be ashamed of.*

Actor 7: *Margretha said, "If he wants me, then I'll take him gladly, for I fear if things are not resolved quickly, bilbulim might result."*

Erith: And then she uses this fantastic concept — *bilbulim*. Confusions. I think that's really interesting that there's going to be plot confusions. It's religious confusions. It's sexual confusions. This is a story of a lot of partner-switching, which is really provocative, frankly, and totally unexpected for a Jewish grammarian to be writing about this, you know, swaps that are happening here. They're going to celebrate essentially a double marriage, right? — a reunification of Drusiana and Bovo, and a marriage of Margretha and Tiritz, and the people who are included and invited are described in a very interesting way. They're not just Jews, but they're not described as *goyim* or *goys*, as Gentiles. They're described as *khitsoynim*. Outsiders.

Actor 3: *Then he got some new clothes for Drusiana for there was soon to be a double wedding. First, a fine bridal canopy was erected. Then, 50 minyonim, as well as a great many khitsoynim arrived. It was a splendid wedding. There was dancing and jigs as there always is, as well as swordplay and jousts.*

Actor 7: *Everyone had a wonderful time and was in fine spirits. The celebrations went on for four weeks. The two brides were both pleased and each one content with her own husband. And, although Tiritz had a body that looked as though it might have been turned on a lathe, Drusiana would not have traded with Margretha for a second.*

Erith: It is interesting that it is Margretha who is really compromised in the narrative, and she is not the Jewish character. And so in that sense, she's probably safer to have this narrated on her, rather than on Drusiana.



Aaron: Now we come to this third and final part of this episode, which will explore the book's reach and popularity, and the problematic and challenging nature of its relationship to its Muslim characters. We will also discuss divisions that existed among the Jewish communities of Northern Italy.

The Book of Bovo. Part Three: Popularity and Prejudice

Actor 5: *The place where he lay was not far from Skeivonia. He had slept a good three hours into the day when a fine galley from Barbary — believe me, it's true — came sailing along.*

Actor 1: *A sailor keeping watch chanced to catch sight of him lying there on the shore. He said to some merchants onboard, "Unless my eyes deceive me, I see a dead man lying over there, not far away."*

One of them said, "Let's bring him aboard. Maybe we can find out who he was."

Actor 5: *Four men set ashore in the ship's boat and brought the poor lad back to the galley. He looked as though someone ought to bury him. He was unconscious, not moving at all, but they fed him sugar and powdered pearl, and they rubbed him all over his arms and his legs with vinegar and Malmsey wine, a whole bottle full. And gradually, he began to stir.*

Actor 1: *After they had revived him, and after he'd come to, he thought to himself, "What's wrong with me? Have I been hurt?" Then, glancing around, he asked in astonishment, "How did I get on this galley? Why can't I remember? Did the devil bring me here?"*

Then they told him where he had been, and how they had brought him onto the ship. By now, Bovo had recovered completely, and was as strikingly handsome as ever. They were all happy he was on board, and everyone was very fond of him, for whatever they told him to do, he did it right away.

Aaron: So, Erith, let's explore more fully's Bovo's publication history and how it, and stories like it, were received within the Jewish communities.

Erith: We don't exactly know what led to this finally being published but we can imagine that maybe a wealthy patron — somebody — paid Elia Levita to script this, and eventually it gets published. I defer to the literary and cultural scholar, Sander Gilman, who also has reflected on Levita's work. And he noted that the *Bovo-Buch* was very widely read. We see that it was mentioned twice in the Mantuan censors list. It had many re-publications. And you could see that it has been part of the Yiddish literature experience from its real inception. For the rabbis, however, I think we find a different story. And we see that these stories, these chivalric romantic stories, were discouraged. They were considered to be worldly stories, assimilative stories, and there was not a ready way in which they integrated into Jewish life. The German Jewish rabbinate in Germany and in Italy condemned the reading of the worldly stories, and *Bovo-Buch* of course is certainly such one.

Now, in terms of the Sephardic readership — and of course, the book is written in Yiddish, and so it wouldn't have been necessarily accessible to anybody coming from exile from Spain or from Portugal. However, Claudia Rosenzweig points out that the *Buovo d'Antona* itself as a story was familiar to Sephardic Jews from Spain, and there was even a Judeo-Spanish — perhaps in Ladino — ballad called "Celinos y La Adultera," which was apparently preserved by Jews in Greece, in Rhodes. However, *Bovo-Buch* as is did not get carried over, which I think brings up really interesting issues related to how integrated was the Jewish community itself. How much communication, sharing, exchange was going on? The fact that the book was not translated to a Sephardic readership seems to imply that there was a kind of cultural separation of the communities. And you could see that the Sephardic Jews kind of connected to one another. Sometimes they connected more easily with the Levantine Jews — the Jews that were coming from the Middle Eastern, for example, or the eastern Mediterranean — and that the Tedeschi Jews, the Ashkenazi Jews, would stay closer within themselves as a community because clearly

the Palantine Jews, the Levantine Jews, would not necessarily be reading or enjoying the same materials as the Ashkenazi or Tedeschi Jews.

Actor 1: *He walked into the room, proudly strutting back and forth, and everyone looked at him and marveled. One said, "I haven't seen the likes of him for a long time. He must be a real fighting cock when it comes to swordplay and battle. You think Dietrich von Bern and Hildebrand themselves had risen from the dead!"*

Erith: And some of these communities, of course, had different resources, and were coming with a different degree of sophistication. When the Ashkenazim were coming from the north, they were coming, oftentimes, because they were terribly oppressed and have very limited resources, and they were suffering.

Actor 5: *He had never imagined he would have to walk so far, but misfortune had taught him to cope.*

Actor 1: *Nothing could harm him now, since he had nothing left to lose. He walked all the way through Brabant and Burgundy until he finally came to Babylonia.*

Erith: And they were not really wanted by many of the existing communities in northern Italy because they were seen as being backwards and really people of great need and refugees.

Actor 1: *And so they went racing along as the water poured in over the ship sides. The sail was torn to shreds, and the tiller was smashed to bits. They all walked around splashing in water up to their chests. You would think they were all bathing. But then God gave them the good fortune to find an island in the middle of the sea. They moored the ship there and did all they could to secure it well. Eventually, the wind subsided, and then they saw that they had come to Flanders and that across the way from them, there stood a fine town. They set sail for it with their galley.*

Aaron: And if these Ashkenazi refugees were not really wanted, as you say, by the existing communities, how did that play out in terms of how they were treated?

Erith: I've looked at documents that indicated that they were really in some ways mistreated by the resident communities, who happened to be more of the Italiani and sometimes of the Sephardim, who had already, by that point, established themselves more in Italy.

This separation was evident even in the shul, in the synagogues, when sometimes there wasn't a desire to include or welcome in people who I guess the perception would have been that they may change the rites or that they may shift or they may dilute or influence in some ways the way in which the services and the cultural life was conducted. Even though Gilman noted that the German rabbis disagreed with the performance of more worldly stories, in my research, oftentimes there is a divide between the rabbis who are coming from more of a Sephardic background and the Italiani or the Ashkenazi rabbis who were sometimes a little more forgiving actually about worldly stories that were performed theatrically.

I recently realized that the Ashkenazi Jews — the Jews that are coming from difficulties economically and socially — when it came to celebrations, they were acculturated towards finding ways of celebrating in public with each other outside of the home, not so different from what you see evolving in the Italian

piazza, right, with the emergence of buffoonish performers, who eventually led to the creation of commedia dell'arte in the northern part of Italy.

But interesting that you see it evolving from actually the fact that you don't have much, you don't have a space. I get the sense that that might have influenced an openness towards public reading, public gathering, publicly hearing a story told, publicly performing the story, giving different voices to characters in the story, leading to theatrical kind of performance. I mean, I could see that that would be a natural evolution that's actually stemming from, not necessarily cultural sophistication, but actually need.

Actor 5: *The king started chatting with the merchants, and they soon said, "Gracious King, would you like to buy a servant boy? We have the perfect one for you."*

Actor 1: *And they told him all about Bovo, and about how he had come to be with them. Then they showed him the boy. He had fair hair and a pretty complexion, and was really quite flawless. The king looked him over from top to bottom, and then had him trot up and down, and run back and forth, just as one does with a horse one is thinking of buying.*

Aaron: So, *Bovo-Buch* has, as you mentioned earlier, a very wide reach, communicating to people in a variety of places, perhaps even crossing, to an extent, some cultural lines. Share more with us about this.

Erith: The first time that *Bovo-Buch* is published, it's published in Isny, Germany in 1541. The next publication, you are arriving in Amsterdam, around 1640. And 20 years later, 1660, you're in Prague, and then a year later, 1661 you're back in Amsterdam. 1691, you're in Frankfurt, then in Meine, and then Amsterdam again, 1721. And I could go on and on. You have about 30 of these publications, and the big cities that jump out at you are centers for publication of books. Later on, you've got Warsaw. You even have Vilna, which comes up especially in the late 19th century. It's being read among Ashkenazi communities that are diffused and dispersed all throughout. And you can see a continuous line of publication and re-publication all the way into the early 20th century.

There's also something remarkably enduring and cross-cultural about the appeal of adventure and love. And you see that even in the chivalric romances themselves. And you see the evolution of the chivalric romances — the *chanson digeste* that then become more novel-like, and the enduring way in which they persist from the Middle Ages, through the early modern period, the Baroque, even the Enlightenment, and even into the Romantic period. There's just something incredibly appealing about ill-fated lovers whose love endures, who remain ever young somehow, even as they grow old. So it speaks broadly, I think, to our sense of life's dangers and our sense of life's possibilities.

Actor 1: *"May God strike me down if it's not Drusiana! We've been sailing all over looking for her. Her father has all but given up hope."*

He went to her, gave her his hand, and welcomed her most affectionately.

"Aren't you Drusiana? Your father has been missing you so. He sent me out to find you. He knows how you ran away with Bovo."

Erith: And of course, for the Jewish reader, it allowed the Jewish reader to engage in a story that, at its core, was universal, but to engage in it safely so he didn't have to feel that they're taking elements that would have been more overtly Christian. Because, as we see in the *Bovo-Buch*, we have bar mitzvahs, we don't have baptisms. So the elements that could have been estranging — it makes them more familiar. And then you've got the finding of strength in one another as a couple. Drusiana and Bovo are married. This is really interesting to see a kind of marriage persisting and lasting and making it through, even with dragons coming at you and all kinds of scary things. And you've got a kind of story of giving into parenthood, and, on that level, it's told in a non-didactic way, very open to many different interpretations, but it also toes the line of the Jewish family, keeping the generations going. It's not antithetical. It's not really a rebellious story in that sense because unlike, you know, some of these other tales of love that include adultery and things like that, this one doesn't. It's a relatively clean story here. Yes, there's the possibility of multiple marriages when Margretha comes on, but, at the last moment, it's avoided by the story.

Actor 1: *Let us leave those making the preparations for the wedding and sing now a while of Drusiana. She was still with her father, as you know. And she had also heard the news of how Bovo had come to be held in high esteem once again, and of how the fair Margretha was to take him for her husband.*

Actor 5: *She heard that the wedding was going to take place soon, and that many people were coming to it from near and far. She was happy now and thought to herself, "I'll set out at once. I'll go to Bovo, just as he once came to me."*

Aaron: Now, *Bovo-Buch* works differently than some other Yiddish treatments of secular Christian texts in that it seems to dive into challenging views of Muslims as the enemy. What are your thoughts on this and why this piece in particular uses those kinds of portrayals?

Erith: So first, let me kind of underscore the complexity of Jewish/Muslim versus Jewish/Christian relations in the early modern period. Unlike today, the reality of a long medieval period of *convivencia* — living with each other in celebration, more than even toleration — was the reality of the Iberian Peninsula in the Middle Ages for many, many centuries that many people in the early modern period were still aware of. And, at the same time, you also had the reality — kind of across the way, in the Ottoman world, in the Turkish Ottoman world — where Jews were accepted as others called *dhimmi*. They had to pay a tax but they were accepted, tolerated and embraced in many senses. And this is a big contrast for Jews in the Muslim world, as opposed to Jews in the Catholic, or even the Protestant world, where we see waves of expulsion, waves of incredible oppression at the very same period. Jews living in Christian Italy were very aware that Jews living elsewhere in the Muslim world in some ways were faring better. Well, why are Muslims in *Bovo-Buch* — why are they so denigrated? Just to remind ourselves of how they're denigrated — the sultan, right, is presented very negatively. His son is actually called Lucifer. They call his son the devil.

Actor 5: *This same Sultan's son was the ugliest man who had ever been born. People ran away as soon as they saw him. He had huge eyes and huge ears and looked just like a dragon. He was darker than the darkest Moor and had a beard like a goat. He was tall, and huge, and old as well. His name was Lucifer. And he really did look more like the devil than a human being. He was also one of the strongest men who had ever walked on two legs. He had subjugated many kingdoms for no army could withstand his mighty strength.*

Erith: And the people who are Muslim are repeatedly referred to as *Cheiden* in Yiddish, which means “heathens.”

Actor 1: *As soon as the king saw him, he said, “Wretched heathen, away with you and your father. I never promised you my daughter. Indeed, I shit on the very idea. Don't think you'll ever have her. She'd never succumb to your charms. I'd sooner kill my daughter with my own two hands, then give her to a devil.”*

Erith: So how come? Why is this handled in this way? So, on the one hand, of course, the Yiddish — the Tedeschi or Ashkenazi reader or listener — would, of course, not have actually lived in the Iberian Peninsula. He would not have lived, or she would not have lived, in the Ottoman world. And so their experience, their knowledge of Muslims, would have been much more limited, say, than somebody who's coming from a Sephardic background. This may weigh into the portrait and explain the Ashkenazi adoption of a negative kind of construction of Muslim identity, especially because you don't have any counter narratives to really be presented like the Levantines or the Sephardic Jews might have presented. In a sense, you've got the adoption of the Christian view of the Muslim, and the Christian view of the Muslim at this point, was, on the whole, fairly negative. Yes, you have moments in which the Venetians were very aware that their Ottoman counterparts are worthy adversaries, and sometimes you have on coins — for example, you had one leader from the Muslim context, and the Catholic context on the other side of the coin, almost making them seem like equivalents. So there is a kind of respectfulness, and you've got a lot of, of course, defeats at the hands of the Ottomans. But you also have a tremendous amount of hatred. Songs that are written when the Ottomans, for example, attack and defeat Venetian and other powers. So there's a tremendous amount of very violent disdain and hatred towards one another in the Christian world. And in the text, you have an embracing of that, almost without a total critical engagement.

Actor 1: *Each one attacked a separate group of heathens, smashing and slashing through them. Fighting for their very lives, they struck down a great many men.*

Aaron: And not only do the Jewish characters take violent actions which align in some ways with the Christian hegemonic power, but they also participate in questions of dominance through some other means as well.

Erith: In this particular story, you have our main Jewish characters again and again repeatedly taking on the identity of the heathen in disguise.

Actor 1: *Sinibald said, “I like this plan, but I'm afraid someone will recognize Tiritz.”*

Actor 5: *Bovo said, “I can make a powder that will make him darker than coal.”*

And he told them what he needed for it. After he had concocted it just as the beggar had taught him, he rubbed it on Tiritz, all over his hands and face, his neck and ears and forehead.

Actor 1: *Then they dressed him as a Moor, and he looked just like one from head to foot. He wore a little vest and had a dagger on his tokhes.*

Erith: It's a way of highlighting alterity through dress. When Bovo takes on the identity of a Muslim, I think you're talking about one marginalized culture that is dealing with impersonating another

marginalized culture with a kind of understanding of that. But of course, it would be an align against the heathen, and with the Christian, on the Jewish part.

Actor 1: *Then, he stripped one stock naked, and put on that man's heathen clothes. He also took a turban from one of the others and wrapped it around his own head, perhaps 100 turns. Now he looked just like a heathen. There were still two strong men up above, the king's very best. They had been waiting for the others to tie up Bovo. Then they had thought to pull everyone up at one time.*

They shouted down, "Hey, haven't you tied him up yet? Hey, come on. What's taking you so long? Surely you've finished with him by now."

Bovo, who had learned the heathen language, shouted back, "We're done. You can pull him up. Now. He's all tied up and can't escape."

Just these two then pulled him up. But as soon as he had come over the edge, he quickly stuck his sword into the one and knocked the other one down. Then he jumped to his feet, started to run as if the devil from hell were chasing him, and quickly dashed through the city gates. Neither the watchman nor anyone else recognized him.

Erith: Bovo, Drusiana, and even Drusiana has her children disguise themselves as heathens, as Moors. That identity actually helps them to escape danger, which I think is very interesting because then the identification with the Moor, the identification with the heathen is actually an escape valve for our Yiddish characters.

Actor 1: *Now in the meanwhile, she had learned to play the lute quite well. She also knew all about that powder that turned one's skin blacker than coal.*

Actor 5: *Bovo had taught her how to make it. She now rubbed some on herself and on the children's faces, and then dressed herself like a beggar woman.*

Erith: And I can't help but, thinking about a wonderful small document that I saw that still exists and resides in the Vatican libraries — and this is a document that traces a performance back in 1474, in the Adriatic town of Pesaro. The Jewish community, they're performing the presentation of gifts to Solomon. In the image, you see very clearly a blonde, pale woman, arriving from, you know, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, kind of, you know, the Arabian lands. So one presumes she would not look like an Ashkenazi Jew, shall we say, this way, right? She's probably darker skinned. And I find that fascinating in the ways in which race is erased or supplanted in that image. And again, you wonder, is that an internalizing of a kind of European notion of preferential race? What is going on actually there? So I think it's very complicated, but incredibly interesting.

Aaron: Now this very complicated, as you say, and prominent work, while widely known in certain academic circles and by those who are specialists in Yiddish, seems to have disappeared from the popular imagination. Why do you think that is?

Erith: Well, maybe it's a result of the 20th century's decline of Yiddish in general. Maybe it's the result of the Jewish enlightenment period, the *Haskalah*, and the ways in which it expunged the Yiddish tales from what is considered desirable to know, because they were seen to be too Yiddish, too Jewish, too unassimilated, too unenlightened.

Actor 1: *Now there was peace on all sides —*

Actor 5: *and Bovo was free from all wars and all battles.*

Actor 3: *He was truly an extraordinary king, the mighty sovereign of three lands.*

Actor 7: *His sons also grew up to be splendid warriors, and to each of them he gave part of his realm.*

Actor 6: *Thus did they all rule over many lands, —*

Actor 4: *and in the entire world, they had no equals.*

All actors: *And with this my story ends.*



Aaron: Thank you for listening to this special episode of *The Dybbukast*, “The Book of Bovo”.

Readings of selections from *Bovo-Buch* from the English translation by Jerry C. Smith, were performed by actors Joshua Wolf Coleman, Joe Jordan, Julie Lockhart, Rebecca Rasmussen, Clay Steakley, Diana Tanaka, and Mark McClain Wilson.

Scholarship was provided by Dr. Erith Jaffe-Berg.

Miri Koral of the California Institute for Yiddish Culture and Language provided the reading of the Yiddish excerpts and guidance on Yiddish pronunciation.

The music featured at the start of the episode was composed by Solomoni Rossi and performed by the vocal ensemble for theatre dybbuk’s production of *hell prepared*, musical director Fahad Siadat.

Our theme music is composed by Michael Skloff, and produced by Sam K.S. Story editing support is provided by Clay Steakley and Julie Lockhart. The series is edited by Mark McClain Wilson.

Thank you to the Covenant Foundation for supporting the launch of *The Dybbukast* and our development of related resources. Speaking of which, please visit us at theatredybbuk.org/podcast, where you will find links to a wide variety of materials which expand upon the episode’s explorations. And if you want to know more about theatre dybbuk’s work in general, please sign up for our mailing list on that same website on the contact page.

And we look forward to bringing you season two of *The Dybbukast*, beginning in November 2021.

This episode was produced by theatre dybbuk.



Actor 2: Epilogue: Let me tell you now who wrote this book. He calls himself Elia Bokher. He spent a whole year on it and finished in 1507. May God preserve us from all evil beasts and may He deliver us

from all our sufferings and may He grant that we be worthy of seeing the age of the Messiah; he who shall lead us into Jerusalem or into some small village nearby and who shall rebuild for us the temple.

We hear the epilogue read in the original Yiddish.