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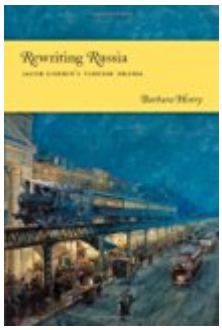
Barbara J. Henry. *Rewriting Russia: Jacob Gordin's Yiddish Drama.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011. 276 pp. $35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-295-99133-7.



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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Accounts of the Yiddish playwright Jacob Gordin's life (1853-1909) are rife with fabrications and myths. During his lifetime and in subsequent biographies, Gordin was charged with not being a native speaker of Yiddish, accused of converting to Christianity, characterized as an uncompromising Tolstoyan, and (as he liked to tell it) rumored to have fled Russia as a political refugee under the cover of night. This new and elegantly written literary history by Barbara Henry reveals that while most likely none of these claims is true, the life Gordin actually lived was at least as interesting as the stories that circulated about him.

Born in Mirgorod, central Ukraine, Gordin came to the United States in the summer of 1891, when modern Yiddish theatre was in its riotous infancy. Actors were prized for forceful emotion and improvisation, stilted Yiddish was the norm, spontaneous musical encores were practically compulsory, audiences were boisterous, and theatres were one of the few secular meeting places for working-class Jews. Gordin is most widely credited for doing away with all of this and for bringing about a renaissance in the American Yiddish theatre through his firm directorial control, insistence on actors sticking to their scripts, and ability to write plays that introduced audiences to high Yiddish culture. In order to understand exactly *how* Gordin managed to achieve this transformation requires a thorough investigation of his life prior to coming to America and a close literary analysis of his most successful plays. *Rewriting Russia* skillfully achieves these dual tasks and shows that it was Gordin's lifelong affinity for the late-maskilic ideals of humanism, Enlightenment, religious reform, and agrarian populism that informed his playwriting and ideas for reinventing the Yiddish stage. Henry's study traces Gordin's zigzagging career through its many turns. He began in Russia as an impertinent and brazen religious reformer, experimented with a variety of writing styles as a journalist, and finally made his most lasting contribution as a playwright in America. *Rewriting Russia* provides a new model for literary history by expertly weaving together previously unexamined Tsarist-era archival

records with insightful literary analysis of Gordin's major works.

Born in the era of Russian Reform, Gordin was among the small but vocal minority of Jews who looked to the state for a potential escape from the oppression of religious orthodoxy and he quickly gravitated toward the Haskalah. In early 1881 in Elisavetgrad, Gordin founded a group called the Spiritual-Biblical Brotherhood (Dukhovno-bibleiskoe Bratstvo) in an attempt to spread the Enlightenment ideals of "reason, brotherhood, and a desire to involve Jews in the culture of its host nations" (p. 49). Rather than convince its fellow Jews to abandon their religious beliefs, what the Brotherhood inspired almost immediately, however, was fury and contempt for the callousness with which it responded to the outbreak of anti-Jewish attacks in the wake of the assassination of Tsar Alexander II soon after the group's founding. In a letter published in early June of 1881 (and which Henry translates in full), Gordin placed the responsibility for the attacks onto Russian Jews themselves, blaming their refusal to acculturate, their religious superstitions, and their "pursuit of profit" (p. 56). This stance was common among some radical Jews at the time, who saw the potential for a popular uprising in the pogroms. As Henry notes, the letter was successful in attracting attention to the Brotherhood, but it was almost entirely in the form of a backlash and did little to advance the group's mission. Unsurprisingly, Gordin's Russian journalism and fiction was often strident, didactic, and moralizing (a tendency that he would successfully subdue later in his plays). Over the next decade in Russia he wrote under half a dozen pseudonyms--less to hide from the Russian authorities than to disguise his identity from his fellow Jews, still angry about the Brotherhood.

As important as it is to uncover Gordin's elusive past in Russia, it is Henry's analysis of Gordin's playwriting that reveals the extent of his contribution to American Yiddish culture. In coming to New York in 1891 (by choice, not fleeing from the police as he often described it), Gordin finally found his footing. It was his ability to interpret Russian literature on the Yiddish stage that allowed him at last to identify a successful means through which to spread his vision of a cosmopolitan, diasporic Jewish people. Henry offers close readings of three of Gordin's plays, ***Der yidisher kenig lir*** (The Jewish King Lear, 1892), ***Di kreytser sonata*** (The Kreutzer Sonata, 1902), and ***Khasye di yesoyme*** (Khasye the Orphan, 1903) and highlights the aesthetic shifts, character changes, and linguistic adaptations that were necessary to communicate the classic works upon which they were based (Ivan Turgenev's ***Stepnoi Korol' Lir*** [1870], Leo Tolstoy's ***Kreitserova Sonata*** [1890], and Turgenev's ***Asya*** [1884]) to immigrant audiences in New York. All three plays were wildly successful and highlight Gordin at his most influential (he wrote more than seventy, many of which are no longer extant). Writing at a time of increased Jewish nationalism, Gordin demonstrated that Yiddish culture did not have to draw its inspiration solely from internal Jewish sources but could engage with the great literatures of the world in such a way as to be relevant and meaningful for a mass Jewish audience.

Henry might have situated Gordin as part of a larger change that was occurring in Yiddish literary culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe, Russia, and the United States. As a number of recent studies have shown, at this time many Yiddish fiction writers and poets began experimenting with modernist and cosmopolitan forms. Interestingly, while a large number of those authors were propelled at least in part by nationalist sympathies or were taking sides in the brief but intense language wars between Hebrew and Yiddish that were getting underway, Gordin took a very similar approach to reimagining the Yiddish theatre but did so not out of nationalist particularism and chauvinism, but

out of a desire to introduce Jews to the value of the larger world.

Always sympathetic toward its protagonist but never blinded to his faults, Henry's ***Rewriting Russia*** convincingly demonstrates that Gordin's plays provided "proof of the theatre's utility as a force for acculturation and vital evidence of the flexibility, range, and depth of Yiddish as a literary language" (p. 29).

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