From Ridicule to Ritual: Standardization and Canonization Processes in the Transmission of Purim Parodic Literature

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ABSTRACT: *This article examines the reception history of parodies of the Talmud written for Purim. Since the 12th century, as far as we know from the surviving witness, parodic literature has been one of the main literary expressions for the celebration of Purim. The most distinctive examples for this genre are parodies of the Talmud, most prominently Kalonymos ben Kalonymos'* Massekhet Purim *and Gersonides'* Megillat Setarim*, both written in the early decades of the 14th century. This article will demonstrate how the reception history of parodic literature for Purim portrays almost an opposite picture to the common perception of transmission and reception of pre-modern non-canonical texts in the Jewish world. Unlike other non-canonical texts, the medieval Purim parodies were copied and printed for over 400 years in the same way – without changes in their contents or their comical elements. Moreover, in the 17th and the 18th centuries, these parodies inspired new parodic pieces that copied the same comical characteristics, originally written hundreds of years earlier, almost without referring to the time and place in in which they were written.*

KEYWORDS: *Purim – Parody – Jewish literature – Medieval literature – Book History – Reception History*

The process of transmission of sacred texts has always been a complicated issue in the Jewish world. One of the basic perceptions regarding the most canonical Jewish texts is that their wording bears a crucial role, and the ideal process of transmission should not involve any changes to it. Indeed,

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multiple methods and technologies have been specially developed over the years to help those who transmit the texts (mainly scribes, but in later days also printers) keep the wording of the sacred works as accurate as can be. The best examples can be found in the transmission history of the Hebrew Bible. Due to the centrality of its precise wording, the Hebrew Bible became a catalyst for different methods of textual supervision, such as counting the number of phrases, verses, words, and letters.[1] Moreover, since the 8th century, three textual systems have been developed specifically for keeping the wording of the Hebrew Bible: systems of diacritical signs for vocalization called *niqqud*,[2] Cantillation[3] and the Masorā the collection of comments and information on the Biblical text by the Masoretes.[4] Although the Talmudic literature did not have unique techniques of transmission like those of the Hebrew Bible, there are nevertheless many prominent examples highlighting the importance of transmitting the wording of these rabbinic writings as carefully and accurately as possible. Sensitivity to the wording of the Talmudic literature can be found in the many commentaries and exegetic pieces written on the Babylonian Talmud (the central text in rabbinic Judaism), and especially in the *Haggahot* literature, which focuses on the wording of the Talmudic text, or other canonical rabbinic works.[5]

Importantly, this careful precision of wording in the transmission of canonical Jewish texts did not extend to the transmission of 'non-canonical' pieces. As a result, any text that was not considered 'sacred' (be it literary, philosophical, scientific or mystic) was highly likely to go through major changes in its history of transmission, with every scribe feeling free to edit, add or 'censor' parts of it. Examples of this process can be found in the reception and transmission of historical,[6] medical and scientific[7] or

[1] On the concept or – in many respects – the *myth* of the stability of the Hebrew Bible see Tov 2015, pp. 174-180.
[2] See for example Morag 1972; Eldar 2018.
[3] See for example Breuer 1989.
[4] See Ofer - Lubotzky 2013, pp. 89-113; Ofer 2019.
[5] See Spiegel 2005; Halvin 2007, pp. 217-221.
[6] See for example the complicated transmission history of the famous Jewish historical book of *Yossipon*: Flusser 1980; Sela 2009; Dönitz 2013. For another example of transmission processes of historical texts see the transmission history of the stories of Eldad ha-Dani in Perry 2010, pp. 51-91.
[7] See for example Freudenthal 2014, pp. 11-187.

mystic texts.[8] The famous rabbinic literature scholar Israel Ta-Shma, referred to the pre-modern Jewish literature as *open books*, texts that their copyists and readers tend to add, change and illuminate from them, even when the texts' authors tried to protect their wording.[9]

One literary genre that surprisingly suggests an exception is the parodic literature for Purim. In the following I will show how the main pieces in the genre, *Massekhet Purim* ("Purim Tractate"), *Sefer Ḥabakbuk* ("The Book of Ḥabakbuk") and *Megillat Setarim* ("Scroll of Secrets"), all written in the 14th century, were copied and printed in the same way for more than 400 years, without changing their wording or updating the comical elements for later readers and scribes. Moreover, in the 17th and 18th centuries, the medieval parodies become literary standards for new parodies that reuse the basic features of the medieval classics over and over again, creating a set of conventions for writing comical pieces for Purim.

The case study of the reception history of parodic literature for Purim portrays different, and mostly undiscussed relationships between the character and status of a text or a genre and its transmission processes, and between entertainment, humor and ritual in the pre-modern Jewish world.

The Purim Parodic Literature: General Background

The role that Purim has traditionally played in the Jewish calendar has often been compared to that of the Christian carnivals.[10] As early as the Middle Ages, the festival of Purim was unique in the Jewish calendar as a time for artistic and cultural expressions traditionally considered inappro-

[8] See Abrams 2013.

[9] Ta-Shma 1993, pp. 14-24.

[10] Portraying the celebration of Purim as a kind of Jewish carnival, a parallel to the medieval and Early Modern European carnivals, is very common. See for example: Roth 1933, pp. 520-526; Gaster 1950, pp. 73-78. In the last 30 years, we can see more and more studies on Purim that use tools and theories from literature and anthropology. Many times, these studies tend to treat Purim as a carnival, just like other non-Jewish carnivals. For example see Rubinstein 1992, pp. 247-277; Belkin 2002. The perception of Purim as a Jewish carnival was one of the central themes in a special issue of Poetics Today that was dedicated to Purim. See especially Daniel Boyarin's introduction to the issue: Boyarin 1994, pp. 1-8. Also noteworthy is Harold Fisch, who emphasizes the differences between Purim and the European Christian carnivals: Fisch 1994, pp. 55-74.

priate during the Jewish year. The lighter character of the holiday made it a time when dance[11] and theatre, for example, could be performed and deemed legitimate. One of Purim's most distinctive artistic expressions was the parody of canonical sacred texts.

Parodic literature for Purim relies on a simple mechanism. Its humor is based on the medieval Antimodel, as described by Maria Corti:[12] The parody uses the same aesthetic traits as the Jewish sacred texts, mimicking their language, format and terminology. But rather than dealing with religious and legal discussions, it addresses 'earthly' subjects, specifically the drinking and feasting at the Purim banquet. Though Purim parodic literature utilized all the canonical Jewish texts: liturgical literature (prayers and *piyutim*), legal *halakhic* literature (such as rabbinical *responsa*), and mystical literature (mainly the Book of the *Zohar*),[13] the most distinctive examples for this genre are parodies of the Talmud.

Arguably the most important and famous of the parodies created for Purim are three works written in the first decades of the fourteenth century: *Massekhet Purim*, a parody of the Talmud, written by the Provençal translator, philosopher and writer Kalonymos ben Kalonymos at the time he was in Rome between 1324-1328;[14] and two texts by the Provençal philosopher, astronomer, mathematician and Bible commentator Gerson-

[11] See Friedhaver 1999, pp. 70-78.

[12] Corti 1979, pp. 350-366.

[13] Unfortunately, there are very few studies on the different genres and styles of parodic literature for Purim. The best discussion to date is still Moritz Steinschneider's detailed list of Purim parodic texts titled *Purim und Parodie*, written and published over the first years of the last century: Steinschneider 1902-1904; See also Davidson 1907; Mayer Modena 2001a, pp. 303-342. It is also worth mentioning that parodic techniques were also used in the 16th century Hebrew play *A Comedy of Betrothal* by Leone de' Sommi, that was performed during the Purim celebration. The play contained a lot of biblical quotes and misquotes in the spirit of the Purim parodic literature. See for example Lipshitz 2010.

[14] The dating of *Massekhet Purim* was considered problematic for many years. It is clear that although Kalonymos ben Kalonymos is originally from Arles, the parody was written when he stayed and worked in Rome, mainly due to the fact that the parody contains various details of the Italian and Roman surroundings, such as the mentioning of Italian dishes (see Modena 2001, pp. 52-58), or poking fun at the Romans' gambling habits. However, the question of when exactly Kalonymos was in Rome remains without a definitive answer. Leopold Zunz suggested that since Kalonymos was certainly in Provence in 1317 and 1322, he was probably in Rome between 1318-1322. See Zunz 1876, pp. 150-153; and see also Davidson 1907, pp. 33; Cassuto 1904, pp. 3-15. In 2002, Josef Shatzmiller suggested, based on new archival sources, that Kalonymos stayed in Rome between 1324 and 1328. Shatzmiller 2012, pp. 163-169.

ides (R. Levi b. Gershon) – *Sefer Ḥabakbuk*, a parody of the Bible; and *Megillat Setarim*, a parody of the Talmud, both written in Provence in 1332.[15] The three parodies were first printed together in 1513 in Pesaro by the Jewish printer Gerson Soncino,[16] and since then have been consistently printed and copied together. The parodies also became an inspiration for many later Purim parodies of the Talmud, between the 15th century and 18th centuries.[17] The later parodies were written, copied and printed at the same time and in the same geographical areas where the now 'classic' parodies were copied, and sometimes both the medieval and the later parodies were copied together in small 'anthologies' of parodic texts, compiled especially for Purim.[18]

When referring a pre-Modern literary sub-genre as 'parodic,' it is important to be aware that the contemporary readers and writers of the genre did not use the work *parody* to describe their work. They usually referred to their parodies as *Purim Tractates* (*Massakhtot Purim*) or *Drunkards' Tractates* (*Massakhtot Shikorim*). However, though the modern word *parody* postdates these premodern texts,[19] their mechanism is nevertheless consistent in many aspects with the modern theoretical definitions of parody.

The modern discussion on the definition of parody is far too extensive to cover in this limited context.[20] Nevertheless, most definitions agree that every parodic text is based on two different layers of text. The first layer is called by French theoretician Gérard Genette the *hypotext*. This is the

[15] Davidson 1907, pp. 133-134.

[16] *Ibidem*, pp. 115-117; Habermann 1978, pp. 136-144.

[17] Davidson 1907, pp. 44-47, 134-147, 172-187; Habermann 1978. Habermann does not distinguish between the medieval and the early modern parodies.

[18] Habermann 1978.

[19] See Burde 2010, pp. 215-242.

[20] It is possible to schematically divide most of the theoretical discussions on the parody in the 20th and the 21st century into two main categories. The first contains discussions that mainly treat the parody as a literary technique. In this category it is important to mention Gérard Genette, who discusses the main features of the parody as a literary technique that can appear in different genres and contexts: Genette 1997. Another example is Simon Dentith's discussion, in which he uses the term *parodic form*. The *parodic form* appears in different texts and genres at different times and places: Deninth 2000. See also Hutcheon 2000. The second category contains studies and discussions that refer not only to the parodic technique but also to the parody as a literary genre. Margaret A. Rose, for example, makes a distinction between the parodic literary technique and the parodic genre (*general parody*); Rose 1993, pp. 33-38.

text that functions as the base of the parody. The second layer is the *Hypertext*, the new text that is based on the *hypotext*.[21] In a parody, the *hypertext* suggests an intentionally distorted version of the *hypotext*. The *hypotext* of a parodic piece can be a specific text or a specific literary genre. The distortion itself can be very minor, even of one letter,[22] but it creates a new and comical context to the *hypotext*. For the parody to work, its readers must be familiar with the *hypotext* and understand its new and surprising context.[23]

The parodic literature for Purim follows these main features of a parodic piece. It uses the canonical texts and canonical rabbinic genres as *hypotexts* and creates new *hypertexts* that distort the original canonical texts by creating a new, Purimic context. The basic parodic technique of the parodic literature for Purim is close to that of non-Jewish medieval parodic literature, especially the parodies of canonical Christian texts, mistakenly called *Parodia Sacra,*[24] like the parodic stories of St. Nemo, or the drunkards' masses.[25]

Even though the medieval Talmudic parodies were important for the history of Hebrew literature, and influenced other literary pieces for hundreds of years, they have so far received very little scholarly attention. The only two major studies on the parodies are over a century old: Moritz Steinschneider's series of articles, published under the title *Purim und Parodie* (1902-1904),[26] and Israel Davidson's *Parody in Jewish Literature* (1907), which included longer sections dedicated to the literary features of the parodies, their authors and the main manuscripts and printed editions.[27] One small additional study is a short article by Abraham Meir Habermann on the printed editions of the parodies (1972).[28] Despite their significance, these three studies are all predominantly bibliographic in nature.

[21] Genette 1997, pp. 7-10.
[22] *Ibidem*, pp. 33-35.
[23] *Ibidem*, p. 35. However, in the case of the Purim parodies based on the Talmud, the readers did not need to be scholars in order to enjoy and laugh from the paordies. They only needed to be familiar with the basic literary characteristics of the Talmudic literature. For example, we have one manuscript of a Purim Talmudic parody from 1713 in Amsterdam that was copied by a 14 year old student that just started his studies. See Cohen 2020, pp. 135-152.
[24] See Burde 2010.
[25] Bayless 1996, pp. 57-128.
[26] See footnote 12.
[27] Davidson 1907, pp. 19-29, 44-48, 115-147, 172-187.
[28] Habermann 1978.

The Purim parodies of the Talmud are not only an important part of the history of pre-modern Hebrew literature – they also suggest an interesting cultural phenomenon. On the one hand, the parodies contain elements that we might consider 'profane'. They use canonical and sacred texts to create humorous literature for the expressed purpose of entertainment. On the other hand, in spite of their evident comical and entertaining attributes, the Purim parodies cannot be considered as 'secular' works *tout court*.[29] All of the Purim parodies were meant to be read or performed on a specific date of the Jewish traditional calendar and are deeply rooted in the religious Jewish annual cycle. The laughter triggered by the comical pieces of Purim can thus be treated as some form of *ritual* laughter:[30] a fulfillment of the Purim celebration.

In order to understand the Purim parodies as a genre, it is necessary to establish the relationships between the different elements within the texts and the genre's *Sitz im Leben*. Perceiving the basic comical characteristics of the Purim literature as fundamentally ritualistic raises the following question: Is the ritualistic character of the pieces merely superficial – affecting only their performing tradition – or are the texts, and the comical elements in the texts, treated as traditional features that should be kept and passed from generation to generation? In other words – what is the main role of the comical characteristics in the Purim parodies, to entertain and make people laugh, or rather to maintain the rules and conventions of a literary tradition?

In the following, I would like to examine the latter possibility. I argue that the ritualistic context of Purim literature had an effect on the texts themselves. Through an examination of the history of Talmudic parodies and the reception of their main 'canonical' works from the fourteenth century, I will try to show that, due to its ritualistic nature, for a substantial part of the historical audience, the most important thing in the Talmudic parodies was keeping to the genre's basic rules, rather than creating new and original comical features.

[29] It is worth mentioning that besides the special parodies written for Purim, there are other Jewish parodic pieces from the medieval and early modern times, and from the same geographic areas of the first Purim parodies. For example, the parodic techniques in the works of the medieval Italian Jewish poet Immanuel Romano, or the parody *Sefer love u-malve* ("The Book of Moneylender and Borrower") that concerns moneylending. See for example Bonfil 2015; Fishkin 2018, pp. 355-382.

[30] Douglas 1975, pp. 90-115.

'The Classics': Massekhet Purim*,* Sefer Ḥabakbuk *and* Megillat Setarim

The first known Jewish Purim parodies of non-liturgical[31] texts are Kalonymos' *Massekhet Purim* written between 1324-1328, and Gersonides' *Sefer Ḥabakbuk* and *Megillat Setarim*, all three of which were written 1332. Although Kalonymos' and Gersonides' pieces are different from one another, they nevertheless share several easily identifiable common features:

a. The parodic mechanism: as mentioned before, the texts are structured like a Talmudic dialectic discussion, but their contents deal with the feasting, celebrating and drinking in Purim, usually without referring the narrative of the biblical Esther Scroll, that is being read during Purim. One form that the use of the Talmudic or rabbinic literature in parodies can take is that of a direct reference to an existing paragraph in the original. One example is the first paragraph of Gersonides' *Megillat Setarim*:[32]

חבקבוק קבל תורה מכרמי ומסרה לנוח ונוח ללוט ולוט לאחי יוסף ואחי יוסף לנבל הכרמלי ונבל הכרמלי לבן הדד ובן הדד לבלשצר ובלשצר לאחשורוש ואחשורוש לרב ביבי[33] בימי רב ביבי נתמעטו הלבבות וראו היתה נקלה להשתכח תורה מישראל וכתבוה שנאמ :"עת לעשות לה' הפרו תורתך"

Ḥabakbuk received Torah from Karmi [in Hebrew: my vineyard], and gave it to Noah and Noah to Lot and Lot to Joseph's brothers and Joseph's brothers to Nabal

[31] The first textual evidence for a Purim parody is the twelfth-century parodic liturgical poem (*piyyut*) *Leyl Shikorim* (Hymn for the Night of Purim). The *piyyut*, written by Menaḥem ben Aharon, about whom we know very little, is based on the *Hymn for the First Night of Passover*, written by the eleventh century Ashkenazic poet Meir ben Isaac Shatz. The parodic *piyyut* imitates the language and the form of Meir Isaac's *piyyut*, but changes its content by dealing with drinking during the Purim celebration. Menaḥem ben Aharon's parody appeared in the famous twelfth century halakhic-liturgical composition *Maḥzor Vitry*, written and compiled by Simḥa ben Samuel of Vitry. See Davidson 1907, pp. 4-5.

[32] All of the quotes from *Megillat Setarim* are based on the first printed edition of the text, printed by Gershom Soncino in Pesaro in 1513. The version was published in a facsimilia edition in 1978: Kalonymos Kalonymos ben and Gersonides 1978. Any significant changes between the printed text and the other extant manuscripts will be mentioned in the footnotes. For more information on the first printed edition see Davidson 1907, pp. 115-117.

[33] In four manuscripts (Oxford, The Bodleian Library, MS heb. e. 10 and MS Mich. 3; Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, MS Add. 2661 and Vatican City, Vatican Library, MS ebr. 107) it is written: «and Ben-hadad to Ahasuerus and Ahasuerus to Belshazzar and Belshazzar to Rabbi Bibi».

from the Carmel and Nabal from the Carmel to Ben-hadad and Ben-hadad to Belshazzar and Belshazzar to Ahasuerus and Ahasuerus to Rav Bibi, and in the days of Rav Bibi the hearts became less and the Torah was about to be forgotten from Israel, and they wrote it, as stated: «It is time to act for the Lord, for your law has been broken» (Ps. 119:126).[34]

The fictitious chain of transmission presented in the parody is based on the first lines of the famous Mishnaic ethical teachings compilation, *Pirkei Avot* (The Chapters of the Fathers):

משה קבל תורה מסיני ומסרה ליהושע ויהושע לזקנים וזקנים לנביאים ונביאים מסרוה לאנשי כנסת הגדולה הם אמרו שלשה דברים הוו מתונים בדין והעמידו תלמידים הרבה ועשו סייג לתורה:[35]

Moses received the Torah from Sinai and delivered it to Jehoshua, and Jehoshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the men of the Great Synagogue. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment and raise up many disciples; and make a fence to the Torah.[36]

Other paragraphs in the parodies do not necessarily refer to a specific text but use the main textual and stylistic characteristics in order to create completely new 'halakhic' discussions. Here is an example for that technique, also taken from *Megillat Setarim*:

הכל חייבין בשמחת פורים ובאכילת מטעמים שנאמר "והיה משתיהם תוף וכנור ונבל וחליל ויין"[37] וכל המרבה בזה תבא עליו ברכה :
ואפילו חל פורים בתשעה באב שנאמ' "ישמח אב" :

All are charged with the celebration of Purim and the eating of good food, as it is stated: «and their feast was celebrated with drum, lyre, harp, flute and wine», and the more one celebrates, so shall he be blessed.
And [it should be celebrated] even if Purim occurs in the 9th of Av, as it is stated: «A wise son brings joy to his father» (Pr. 10:1; 15:20).[38]

[34] All translations are mine unless stated otherwise.
[35] Mishan, Massekhet Avot 1:1.
[36] The English translation is taken from Taylor 1969, p. 4.
[37] This quote is taken from the parodic mock-biblical text *Sefer Ḥabakbuk*, also written by Gersonides; see Davidson 1907, pp. 19-25; Beddig 2014, pp. 171-184.
[38] A pun on the Hebrew word *Av* that, in addition to being the name of one of the Hebrew months, also means 'father'.

Although the paragraph uses Mishnaic terminology, especially the term הכל חייבין,[39] it suggests an independent discussion that does not necessarily lean on a specific textual paragraph from the Talmud or the Mishnah. Unlike the first quotation presented above, the comical effect of this paragraph is not connected to a surprising treatment of a famous quote, but to the illogical and absurd 'halakhic' statement: Purim, that is celebrated in the month of *Adar,* should be celebrated even if it comes during the fast of ninth in *Av*, which occurs, unsurprisingly, in the month of *Av* (five months later, usually in July or August).

Both strategies – the quoting of specific paragraphs of the Mishnah and Talmud and the creating of new discussions in the language and terminology of the Talmud – appear in both of the medieval parodies, *Megillat Setarim*, and *Massekhet Purim*.

b. The use of fictional sages: The Talmudic text is usually presented as a scholastic discourse between rabbinic sages of late Antiquity. The medieval Talmudic parodies used the same structure to create new discussions. However, although some actual important Jewish sages are mentioned in the parodies, such as Rabbi Akiva,[40] most names in the texts are made up, usually based on different, mostly negative characters. In Kalonymos' parody we can find *Rabbi Shakran* (Rabbi Liar),[41] *Rabbi Shatyan* (Rabbi Drunkard),[42] *Rabbi Akhlan* (Rabbi Glutton)[43] and others. One of the most important sages in Gersonides' parody is *Rav Bibi.* According to the parody the name does not refer to one of the few amoraim named *Rav Bibi*, but to a world play on the Latin verb *bibere*, 'to drink'.[44]

[39] For example: M. Ḥagig 1:1, T. Berakhot 5:14, T. Rosh Ha-shanā 2:5.

[40] «The Nazirite, if his vow came prior to our commands, our command will be refused, and if our commands came prior to his vow, his vow is refused in favor of our commands. And Rabbi Akiva would have liked to be stricter»; from: Kalonymos Kalonymos ben and Gersonides 1978.

[41] «רבי שקרן אומר תודוס איש רומי הנהיג בני רומי לתת מעות פורים לנערים» [Rabbi Shakran says: Todos from Rome commanded the people of Rome to give Purim money for the young men]; from: Kalonymos Kalonymos ben and Gersonides 1978.

[42] «רב שתיין אומר אין שיעור לשתיה» [Rabbi Shatyan says: there is no limit for drinking]; from: Kalonymos Kalonymos ben and Gersonides 1978.

[43] «רב אכלן אמר יש שיעור לשתייה» [Rabbi Akhlan says: there is a limit for drinking]; from: Kalonymos Kalonymos ben and Gersonides 1978.

[44] «מנא לן משמיה? שכן בלשון יוני קורין לשתי חמרא ביבוי» [How do we know about his name?

c. Time and place: the medieval parodies contain conspicuous details pertaining to the locality where they were written. Kalonymos' 'Italian' parody details a long list of all the Purim dishes Moses allegedly received from God on Mount Sinai, most of which are dishes taken from the Italian cuisine.[45]

Gersonides, on the other hand, dedicates a long discussion to the election of a Purim king[46] – similar to the crowning of a King or Bishop of Fools in the Christian Carnival.[47] This local custom is documented only in Provençal texts of this period.[48]

Both Kalonymos and Gersonides also employ the same humorous literary device: both insert themselves and their surroundings in the text.[49]

Due to the fact that in Greek a wine drinker is called *Biboi*]; from: Kalonymos Kalonymos ben and Gersonides 1978.

[45] «Rabbi Mordecai said; twenty four kinds of dishes were told to Moses on Mount Sinai and a man should eat all of them in Purim: casti [probably a pastry filled with meat], filled dumplings, tortoli [*tortelli*], biscuits, *tortolichelli*, *mostaccioli* [filled cookies], *tocato* [unclea, a general term that can be translated into delicatesses], *kisanim* [unclear if it refers to dumplings or to dried fruits], *itinio*, ram's meat, gazelle meat, fallow deer meat, goose meat, chicken meat, pigeon meat, turtledove meat, swan, duck [*anitre*], pheasant [*fasani*], partridge [*pernici*], coot [*folaghe*], little coturnix [*quagliocci*], coturnix [*coturnici*] and to them they added the lasagne, and almond cookies [*macaroni* and *cresoni*]». From: Kalonymos Kalonymos ben and Gersonides 1978; for a full explanation on the dishes see Mayer Modena 2001b, pp. 52-54; Baricci 2013, p. 292.

[46] «Every town with ten Jews or more have to appoint a king, as it is written: "you shall indeed set a king over you" (Deut. 17, 15) and if there are not ten people, they must appoint judges and officers, as it is written: "You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns (Deut. 16, 18)"»; from: Kalonymos Kalonymos ben and Gersonides 1978.

[47] On the custom of crowning the Bishop of Fools see Kerchever Chambers 1963, I, pp. 277, 289, 296-298; Cochis 1998, pp. 97-105; Harris 2011, pp. 167-186.

[48] In the 14th century, the custom of picking a king for Purim appears only in three parodic texts from Provence: Gersonides' *Sefer Ḥabakbuk* and *Megillat Setarim*, and in an anonymous text of parodic *Haskamot* (legal approbations) for Purim from the fourteenth century, that was not printed until the beginning of the twentieth century in Israel Davidson's research; see Davidson 1907, pp. 135-139.

[49] See for example: «אמר לו קלונימוס בשלמא ממהרין לצאת שמא יתעשן הבית והקדירה» [Rabbi Kalonymos said to him: why do people hurry to get our (of the synagogue in Purim)? Because they do not want their house and the casserole will be filled with smoke.]; «Levi said: why is it written, "because Abraham obeyed my voice"? (Gn. 26, 5) From this quote, we can learn that Abraham obeyed the commandment of Purim»; from: Kalonymos Kalonymos ben and Gersonides 1978.

The cast of characters in Kalonymos' *Massekhet Purim* incorporates not only fictional sages, but also non-fictional contemporaries of Kalonymos, such as Hillel ben Samuel (ben Elazar of Verona) (1220–1295), who appears in *Massekhet Purim* as Hillel the physician.[50] Although R. Hillel had passed away by the time Kalonymos wrote his parody, his character was known, not only due to his famous philosophical book *Sefer Tagmuley Hanefesh,*[51] but also from his correspondence with Zeraḥiah ben Isaac ben Shealtiel Ḥen (Gracian) and Immanuel the Roman.[52]

The three Purim parodies are important not merely for their own literary and anthropological merits. Their importance also stems from their impact on later generations of readers, setting the foundations for a whole new sub-genre. While they became popular almost instantly, their real influence began with the first printed editions, first in Pesaro, printed by the famous Jewish printer Gerson Soncino[53] in 1513, and then in Venice, printed by Daniel ben Cornelio Adelkind, the son of the Jewish printer Cornelio Adelkind[54] in 1552.[55]

Although Kalonymos' and Gersonides' parodies are different, independent texts, they have, since the first printed editions, consistently been assembled and printed together. Consequently, they have also been read together and perceived as one textual composite: in most of the manuscripts from the sixteenth century onward, and in all later printed editions, the parodies appear together. Frequently the pieces were treated as one extensive text, given the name *Massekhet Purim*.[56]

The 'printed codex' of these three parodies became the main influence on later Purim parodies, written from the 16th to the 18th century. Most of these parodies are similarly titled *Massekhet Purim* (or, *Talmud/*

[50] «Rabbi Hillel the physician says: you should eat naught on Purim but things that are easy to digest, so one will be able to eat fourteen meals in Purim, as Rabbi Balaam said»; from: Kalonymos Kalonymos ben and Gersonides 1978.

[51] See for example Rigo 1998, pp. 431-433; Schwartz 2009, pp. 9-13.

[52] For more information about the correspondence between Hillel and Zeraḥia see Schwartz Yossef 2017, pp. 181-203. For information about Immanuel's place in the correspondence see Steinschneider 1881, pp. 165-167; Fishkin 2011, pp. 25-26.

[53] See Marx 1936, pp. 427-501; Hacker 2019, pp. 207-218.

[54] See Habermann 1980.

[55] Davidson 1907, pp. 115-118.

[56] For a list of the printed edition for the Purim parodies see: Habermann 1978.

Massekhet Shikorim, "The Drunkards Tractate").[57] Later parodies remained close to the medieval parodies not only in their names, but also in their basic features.

In what follows, I will demonstrate how through the centuries, the subgenre of Talmudic parody for Purim went through a process of canonization[58] of these 'medieval classics', and a standardization of the main elements and the content of the genre. I do so first by examining (a) the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of the 'classic' medieval parodies, and (b) the characteristics new and 'original' Ashkenazic Purim parodies written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Prioritizing 'Form' Over 'Fun': The Rezeptionsgeschichte *of the Medieval Parodies*

Even after the arrival of their first two printed editions, the medieval parodies were still copied by hand many times all over the Jewish world. The National Library of Israel's Hebrew manuscripts catalogue, for instance, lists no less than 53 copies and fragments of the parodies. Although most extant manuscripts are Italian, there are also Ashkenazic, eastern and even one Persian copy, copied in 1700.

Examining the various manuscripts and prints of the parodies reveals one main fact. Apart from their varying titles, all of the printed editions and manuscripts are textually almost identical. In this, they differ strongly from other non-canonical Jewish texts, the different copies of which differ extensively from one another, especially in manuscripts.

Furthermore, all of the different elements of these texts, which are deeply rooted in their specific time and place – names of dishes, wordplay, internal jokes – are kept verbatim in all the extent editions. It is not clear, however, how puns on Latin words or Italian dishes from the 14th century could have been considered funny hundreds of years later, by young Jew-

[57] Davidson 1907, pp. 44-45, 172-182; Habermann 1978, pp. 136-144.

[58] In using the term 'canon' regarding the parodic literature for Purim, I refer to a wider definition of the term, not necessarily to a text that was meant to be followed (*normative* canon, as called by Moshe Halbertal), but to a text that is being taught, transmitted (*formative* canon) and becomes a literary standard (*exemplary* canon); see Halbertal 1997, pp. 3-6; Lawee 2019, p. 6.

ish men from localities as distant from one another Amsterdam, Poland or Persia.

The retention of the wording of medieval parodies in later copies can be partly explained by technological reasons. Most of the evidence that we have regarding the transmission process of the parodic pieces for Purim not only postdates the invention of the printing press, it also postdates the first printed editions of the parodies. Although the invention of the printing press did not fully replace the transmission of texts through manuscripts, it definitely affected it. Both professional and non-professional scribes, who copied books that already existed in printed editions, saw and treated their work differently. Many of them tried to imitate the printed editions of the texts that they copied, tried to draw letters that resembled the printed ones, and created front pages with decorations that were inspired by the printed books of their time.[59] In many respects, it is important to see the history of Hebrew manuscripts of already printed books as part of the transmission history of the Hebrew printed book. Although a printed piece does not necessarily mean a fixed text, the fact that most of the manuscripts of the medieval Purim parodies were based upon the first printed editions of the texts can be one of the reasons for their consistency.

However, the invention of the printing press and the fact that most of the existing pieces of evidence for the transmission process of the medieval parodies are from the early modern period cannot explain another, related phenomenon, which exists only in some manuscripts and is connected to the adherence to one of the fundamental characteristics of the Talmudic parody: the fictional names of the sages. In three manuscripts, all based on the first printed edition,[60] we find long lists of names of all the rabbis appearing in the parodies, sorted in alphabetical order.

The exact function of these lists is still not clear. One possibility is that they served as a list of characters in a play; however, the medieval parodies of the Talmud are not written as plays, and there are no graphic or codicological pieces of evidence in the copying and printing traditions of the

[59] Schrijver 1990, pp. 24-25.

[60] Amsterdam, Ets Haim Library, 47 E 6 copied in Amsterdam in 1695; New York, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, MS 10188 copied by an Italian scribe in 1698, and MS Heb. 28° 8735, copied by Yaakov ben Sabbatai from Emden between 1728-1729.

texts to indicate that the parodies were ever perceived as plays.[61] Moreover, the lists contain names of personas that are mentioned in the parodies only by name, but do not have a real role in the parodies. For example, we can find in the list general nicknames like החכמים (the sages) or יש אומרים (some say). Furthermore, the lists contain names from both Gersonides' *Megillat Setarim* and Kalonymos' *Massekhet Purim* without any distinction between them. Another possibility is that these lists served as parodic indexes. However, this option is also problematic, since the lists contain no information regarding where the reader may find the different rabbis in the texts themselves, and indexes of names are not common in rabbinic prints of the period (16th to early 18th centuries).[62]

One clue to the possible function that such lists may have served can be found in a short preface in manuscript copied by Yaakov ben Sabbatai from Emden between 1728–1729, where he writes:

אמר הצעיר והקטן תולעת ולא איש: יען ראה ראיתי שיש במסכתות הללו פסוקיי רבים שאינם כלל ועיקר במקרא לכן אמרתי להוסיף מורה מקום מכל הפסוקים הבאים במקרא ואגב חדא תרתי יגעתי ומצאתי והוספתי גם כן כל המאמרים שמביא מרזי הבאים בתלמוד וכל זה עשיתי להקי טורח הקורא שלא ילאה לבקשם ולמצאם אלא בראותו המסכתא והרוצי יוכל לבקש במהרה מה שירצה.
ולמען לא יחסר כל בו הוספתי גם כן כל שמות החכמים והרבנים הנזכרים ב"ב מסכתות הללו על דרך אלפא ביתא כדי שאם תרצה אתה הקורא לדעת ולהיות שגור בפיך כל שמות החכמים האלו תוכל לדעת ולא תלאה למצאם אנה ואנה.[63]

Said the young and small one, a worm and not a man: Having seen indeed that these tractates contain many verses that do not exist in the Bible, I decided to add references to all the quoted verses that appear in the Bible, and I also made an effort and added references to all the sayings that are brought from the Talmud. And I did all of that to save the reader effort, that when he sees the tractate, he could find whatever he wants with ease.
And to top things off, I also added the names of all the sages and rabbis mentioned in the two tractates, in an alphabetical order, so if you, the reader, would like to famil-

[61] There is no extant manuscript of the Talmudic parodies that contains instructions for performing it as a play. More than that, all the manuscripts do not separate the speakers and characters by writing their words in different lines or passages, as it is usually common in manuscripts and prints of plays.
[62] See Weinberg 1997, pp. 318-330; from Weinberg's review it is clear that the first indexes were indexes for themes or verses, and not for characters.
[63] Jerusalem, The National Library of Israel, MS Heb. 28° 8735, 11:1.

iarize your tongue with all these sages' names, you would be able to know, and would not need to bother and look for them all over the tractates.

The scribe of the manuscript regards himself in this preface as a proofreader, or even as a printer.[64] He explains that in order to make the parodic texts clearer and more accessible, he adds references to the Biblical and the Talmudic quotations that appear in the parodies. In that way, he can also help his readers distinguish between the 'fake' biblical quotations that appear in Gersonides' *Megillat Setarim* and *Sefer Ḥabakbuk,* and the actual biblical quotations in the parodies. The scribe also explains that he decided to add a list with all the names that appear in the medieval parodies in order for the reader to know and learn the names of the sages. From this evidence, we can learn that at least for this 18th-century scribe, creating a list of fictitious names in the medieval parodies is a part of a series of systems made by the scribe in order to help the reader become more familiar with the text, and maybe even practice reading the texts and pronouncing the characters' names out loud.[65] This suggests an expectation on the part of Yaakov ben Sabbatai from Emden that the reader of medieval parodies would want to know – and possibly even memorize – all of the fictitious rabbis' names.

Although it is hard to be sure of the exact use of these lists, it is clear that for these three separate scribes, the fictional rabbis' names were a central component in the Talmudic parody, and therefore it was important to be very precise in making lists of all these different names. Yaakov ben Sabbatai from Emden adds another detail to the picture. For him knowing the names of the sages in the parodies is an important aspect in reading and getting to know the medieval Purim texts.

Prioritizing 'Convention' Over 'Innovation': The Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Purim Parodies of the Talmud

Although the medieval parodic pieces for Purim remained popular and were copied over and over through the Early Modern period, the history of the parodic literature for Purim does not end with the medieval texts.

[64] Schrijver 1990, pp. 24-25.
[65] I would like to thank Thom Rofé for this important insight.

The Early Modern period brought new contributions to the corpus of parodic literature for Purim.

During the 17th and the early 18th century, five new Talmudic parodies were written, all of them bearing the same title: *Massekhet Purim* or *Talmud Shikorim.*[66] Unlike the three medieval parodies, *Massekeht Purim, Sefer Ḥabakbuk* and *Megillat Setarim*, whose authors can be distinguished from I think it is in another font. Each other, the five new parodies are five different revisions or rewritings, all based on the same textual core.[67] Moreover, they cannot be attributed to any known authors, but are, in a sense, collective creations, created and edited by anonymous authors. On the front page of one of the manuscripts of the second version of *Massekhet Purim*, there is even a short rhyme that hails the anonymity of the authors:

יסוד מוסר בהררים על ידי אנשים שובעי שמחות
מהללים בהילולים ושבחות
מומחים ובקיאיי בכל מיני משקים
ומאכליי טובים ערבים ומרוקים
ומרוב גודל חסידותם וענונותם
לא רצו להעלות על זכרון בשמותם…[68]

This text was written by men filled with joy
Highly praised and celebrated
Expert and proficient in all kinds of drinks
And good foods, succulent and fine.
And because of the greatness of their righteousness and modesty
They did not wish to be commemorated…

The many of the manuscripts of the seventeenth century *Massekhet Purim* versions also included parodic commentaries to the text such as *Rasha* (רש"ע) (a parody of Rashi; *Rasha* in Hebrew means evil), *Tosafot* and *Maharsha* (מהרש"ע) (a parody of Maharsha- מהרש"א) and it was copied and printed using the same page design as printed versions of the Babylonian Talmud.[69]

[66] Davidson 1907, pp. 44-45.
[67] *Ibidem*, pp. 172-182.
[68] Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Mich. 343, 1:1.
[69] Davidson 1907, p. 176.

Comparing these later parodies to the medieval ones reveals how both the similarities *and* the differences between them reflect the continued 'canonization' of the medieval Purim parody. The newer Talmudic parodies for Purim are similar to the classic parodies in that they retain the defining characteristics of those classics: they contain only discussions relating to the holiday of Purim, and more importantly, re-use the same fictional sages, based on negative characters or adjectives, that were used in the medieval parodies.

The later parodies also reuse names of special characters from the medieval Purim parodic repertoire. They mention the names Rav Karmi (Rabbi Vineyard)[70] and Rav Bakbuk (Rabbi Bottle).[71] The names Karmi, Bakbuk, and Be'eri ('my well') appear already in Gersonides parodic codex for Purim. They are the three main characters in *Sefer Ḥabakbuk*, Gersonides parody of the Hebrew Bible, and also appear in his parody of the Talmud, *Megillat Setarim*. In Gersonides texts, Be'eri and Karmi are two rival kings fighting for sovereignty over Israel. Be'eri is portrayed as the evil water king and Karmi as the righteous wine king. Ḥabakbuk, or Bakbuk, is the prophet sent by God in order to make the righteous wine king rule over Israel. In the later parodies, Be'eri, Karmi and Bakbuk all become a part of the parody's fictitious list of sages. However, they lose their original characteristics and become just three of the multiple rabbis in the parodic *Bet Midrash*.

One key point at which the newer parodies differ significantly from the classics is in their relationship to the time and place in which they were written. Unlike Kalonymos' and Gersonides' pieces, which, as discussed above, mention local customs, detailing dishes and incorporating well-known figures from their own cultural environment, in most of the later parodies, it is almost impossible to find any evidence in the texts' content to reflect the time and place in which it was created.

[70] «דרש רב כרמי: ייג ווין נאמרו ביין...» [Rabbi Karmi said: 13 *vavs* were said on the wine]; from: Davidson 1907, p. 183; «Rabbi Karmi said: why is it written "and wine to gladden the heart of man" (Ps. 104:15)? Because it teaches us that all of the happy things in the world are connected to wine»; from: Davidson 1907, p. 184.

[71] «דרש רב בקבוק: כל מי ששותה יין בפורים ונשתכר כמו נח הצדיק הוא» [Rabbi Bakbuk said: every one that drinks wine on Purim and becomes drunk is like the righteous Noah…]; from: Davidson 1907, p. 183.

Only in two versions of the parodies do we find little pieces of evidence for local customs.[72] In one manuscript, written in Italian handwriting in the eighteenth century,[73] there is a short reference to an Ashkenazic custom of walking around with small alcohol flasks attached to one's neck.[74] The reference appears in the commentary section for the Talmudic parody, called *Tosefta*.

More extensive mention of local customs and dishes can be found in the latest, fifth edition of the parody. In *Massekhet Purim,* printed in Sultzbach in 1814, and in MS Rosenthaliana ROK,[75] also from the 19th century, there are references to local dishes such as *Puter Kukhen* (in Yiddish: 'butter cookies')[76] or *Kreplekh* (in Yiddish: 'dumplings').[77]

Moreover, there is also evidence for wearing costumes during the holiday's celebration.[78] However, these small references are the only examples of local elements or customs that give clues as to the time and place of the parodies. Instead, the parodies' discussions deal mostly with the most obvious and general elements of the Purim celebration – namely, getting drunk.[79]

Another element that emphasizes the later parodies' tendency to disconnect the Purim celebration from the surroundings of their authors and readers is their extensive use of biblical characters and events, weaving

[72] Interestingly, most of the references never appear in the Talmudic text itself but in parodic commentaries.

[73] Moscow, The Russian State Library, MS Guenzburg 653.

[74] «I heard that he was Ashkenazi because you will always find that the Ashkenazis never walk without bottles on their necks, in memory of Rav Bakbuk – Rabbi Bottle», from: MS Guenzburg 653, 93:1.

[75] Amsterdam, Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, MS Rosenthaliana ROK.

[76] "לחמניות סולת אפויה בדבש וחמאה : פיטור קיכין בלע"ז" [Semolina rolls baked with honey and butter: *Puter Kukhen* in foreign language]; from: *Massekhet Purim* (Sulzbach, 1814) 9:1; Ms. Rosenthaliana ROK, 21:1. On Ashkenazic dishes see Kosover 1958, pp. 1-145, especially pp. 71-77, 120-123.

[77] «and the dumplings: *Kreplekh* in foreign language»; from: *Massekhet Purim*, 9:1; Ms. Rosenthaliana ROK, 21:1.

[78] «Once Israel were forbidden to drink on Purim. What did they do? They masqueraded with gentiles' clothes and wore a mask on their faces, and drank, but not from a gentile's [bottle or cup], and from that time they started that custom to dress up in Purim; A mask: a face painted with colors, *Maske* in foreign language.»; from: *Massekhet Purim*, 18:1; MS Rosenthaliana ROK 8:1.

[79] Davidson 1907, pp. 45-46.

characters such as Noah, Isaac and even Moses into the drunkards' celebration of Purim.[80]

The increased adherence to biblical characters and to the classic conventions of the genre make the texts seem somehow frozen in time and place. According to Israel Davidson, these parodies' humor «does not flow from the spring of life, as true humor should».[81]

Though we cannot state how 'true' humor should be, the later parodies, disconnected as they are from any association with a specific time, place or even author, seem to have been reduced to a stripped down, 'by-the-book' version of a Purim parody. Their employment of the comical elements incorporates no attempt to be surprising, fresh or new. On the contrary, they primarily follow the traditional conventions of the genre, creating a stereotypical picture of the holiday. Instead of the Purim portrayed by Kalonymos – filled with special dishes and local personalities from Kalonymos' time – and instead of the Provençal Purim celebration of Gersonides' parodies – which included the special local custom of crowning a designated king for the holiday – the later parodies keep their portrait of the Purim celebration as general – one might even say as *generic* – as possible.

Conclusion

To conclude, the history of the sub-genre of the Purim parodies presents an interesting example of the process of transmission of seemingly non-canonical texts and its complicated relations to the genre's ritualistic character. Over the centuries, the parodic texts became part of the Purim customs in different Jewish communities. As a result, the genre went through a process of standardization. As demonstrated, this process had a deep effect on the role of the comical elements of the genre. The medieval texts went through a process of canonization and were copied, printed

[80] For example: «The sin of Moses, may he rest in peace, was on account of the water and he was doomed to not enter the land, and that was because of the complaint of Israel, who asked for water, and therefore it was said that the desert generation of Israel do not have place in heaven.»; from: Davidson 1907, p. 184.

[81] Davidson 1907, p. 47.

and transmitted through the years almost without any change. Moreover, the characteristics of the first parodies – such as the main topics, and the rabbis' fictional names – became an obligatory feature in the later parodies of the 17th, 18th and the 19th centuries.

From this process, we can conclude that the Talmudic Purim parodies were more than just entertaining works of literature. The fact that the parodies were initially written for a specific occasion in the Jewish calendar, their content dealt almost solely with the celebration of the holiday, emphasized their ritualistic characters. In effect, the parodies function almost like liturgical pieces. The same pieces, or at least very similar pieces, were performed every year in Purim, time and again, and probably in front the same audience. It is not difficult to imagine an audience familiar with the texts by heart, still laughing each and every time to the same old jokes, maybe because they are funny, but certainly because the laughter is part of the ritual.

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