

Shabbtai Zvi and the Seductions of Jewish Orientalism

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In one of his earliest diary entries, dated just before the outbreak of World War I, Gershom Scholem describes a trip to the Swiss Alps.¹ There he engaged in a series of romantic meditations which include a reference to Shabbtai Zvi who, he says, astonished the people by going into the marketplace in Izmir and pronouncing the four-letter name of God. Despite the popular belief that he should have been struck by lightning, nothing happened. Scholem uses this historical anecdote as a rather surprising way of demonstrating the deluded nature of the Jewish people, who cannot recognize the metaphysical meaning of the grandeur and beauty of the high mountains. Whatever this obscure text may have actually meant to him, one has the distinct feeling that Scholem is comparing himself to Shabbtai Zvi, a comparison that gains some support from his later claim in the diary to be the Messiah.²

How and what did Scholem know about Shabbtai Zvi in 1914? He certainly might have encountered him in Graetz's *History*, which, as he tells us in his memoirs, he already read in 1911.³ What I wish to argue in this paper, however, is that Shabbtai Zvi was in the air in many different forms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the first sentence of his great essay, 'Redemption Through Sin', Scholem says that 'no chapter in the history of the Jewish people during the last several hundred years has been as shrouded in mystery as that of the Sabbatian movement'.⁴ Despite the common belief today, cultivated in

part by Scholem himself, that he rescued the Sabbatian movement from obscurity and turned it into the major watershed between the Jewish Middle Ages and modernity, there was a rich historical and imaginative literature about Sabbatianism available in German, Yiddish, Hebrew, English and Russian when Scholem was a young man. In his biography of Shabbtai Zvi, Scholem refers occasionally in passing to this literature and generally dismisses it as historically worthless, an accusation that is largely accurate, if exaggerated. But regardless of their historical validity, these novels, biographies and essays created a climate of interest in Sabbatianism that must have caught the young Scholem's attention and suggested certain themes for his later investigations.

Some of this literature about Sabbatianism was surveyed by Shmuel Werses in his book on Sabbatianism and the *Haskalah*.⁵ But Werses ends where I propose to begin: with the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which witnessed perhaps an even greater profusion of writing about Sabbatianism than had been the case earlier in the nineteenth century. Werses concludes with a short chapter on the way Jewish nationalist writers transformed attitudes towards Sabbatianism from the negative stance of much of the *Haskalah* to a new appreciation. Although some of the material that I will cover overlaps with this chapter – and some with material that he covers in other chapters – I want to look not only at literature written by Jewish nationalists, but also by some who are often labeled as assimilationists.

Beyond staking out a somewhat different literary territory from that of Werses, I am interested in some very different issues. Sabbatianism functioned as a kind of cultural code for authors working on the borders between Judaism and modernity, as a projection back onto the seventeenth century of modern problems of Jewish identity and assimilation. The most interesting literature of the *fin de siècle* period was neither pro- nor anti-Sabbatian in the sometimes dichotomous sense we find in Werses. Instead, these works often involve ambiguities that point in suggestive ways to the ambivalence of their authors towards a whole host of contemporary issues: rabbinical authority, heresy, conversion and messianism, among others.

Jewish Orientalism

One issue that I want to address in particular is Sabbatianism as a vehicle for constructing a kind of Jewish Orientalism at a time when the Orient was exerting a particularly complex fascination on Jews. As I shall try to show, ambivalence about the Jewish Orient captured many of the other ambivalences of these writers about contemporary Jewish culture. It is in the context of this Jewish Orientalism that I also want to situate the young Scholem's fascination with Sabbatianism, a context quite different from where he is usually located.

In his now classic work, *Orientalism*, Edward Said suggests that the range of European associations with the Orient, such as 'the Oriental character, Oriental despotism, Oriental sensuality and the like', are really projections or constructions by Westerners, primarily during the age of Imperialism.⁶ The power to construct the Orient as a field of knowledge in certain stereotyped ways was part and parcel of the projection of Western power into the area of the Near East. Yet, because Orientalism had little to do with the actual Orient, it tells us much more about those doing the constructing than those being constructed: 'Orientalism is – and does not simply represent – a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and, as such, has less to do with the Orient than it does with "our" world⁷.

The history of Jewish Orientalism remains to be written,⁸ and I can

only offer the barest outlines here, insofar as they connect to the theme of this paper. Paul Mendes-Flohr has suggested that Jewish views of the Orient shifted with Jewish attitudes towards assimilation. In the middle of the nineteenth-century, Jews sought to distance themselves from their ostensibly 'Oriental' behaviors; with the rise of Zionism and other forms of Jewish self-affirmation at the *fin de siècle*, many Jews, following Martin Buber,⁹ enthusiastically embraced their Oriental heritage in rebellion against the bourgeois West.¹⁰

Without disputing this overall picture, I believe that even those Jews who affirmed the Oriental in themselves did so in ways that were often quite ambivalent, an ambivalence typical of the way the Western imagination generally depicted the Orient. Although Jewish attitudes often resembled those of other Europeans, Jewish treatments of the Orient were complicated by several factors. Jewish Orientalism, as opposed to non-Jewish, involved constructing an object which was also in some sense ostensibly one's self, the subject which was doing the constructing; those who imagined a Jewish Orient were always conscious of the fact that they themselves were being imagined by non-Jews as Orientals. If the Orient became the classic site of the Other, Jewish Orientalism involved a complex dialectic of projection and displacement of oneself onto an object that was never really other. The fact that the Jewish people originated in the Orient as well as the presence of real Jews in the contemporary Orient aroused contradictory feelings among European Jews of identification and alienation.¹¹ These Oriental Jews might represent the vestiges of biblical Jews or, alternatively, primitive Jews still mired in medieval obscurantism and irrationality. If one imagined Jewish identity to be primarily European, the Oriental Jews were an inconvenient embarrassment; on the other hand, if one wished to see in Judaism the 'spirit of the Orient', one might represent both the Orient and the Orientals in far more positive terms. What has not been sufficiently noticed is the way these contradictory attitudes might exist simultaneously even in those eager to affirm their Oriental 'otherness'.

When Zionism emerged as both a political and settlement move-

ment, the question of the Orient took on great urgency.¹² Zionist Orientalism, undoubtedly indebted to both European and Jewish Orientalism of the nineteenth-century, developed its own peculiar dynamic, especially once European Zionists confronted real Oriental Jews, such as the Yemenites, who came to settle in the Land of Israel. Since the Zionists proposed to take the Jews out of Europe and back to the Middle East, ambivalence about becoming once again 'Levantine' turned into a touchstone for the tension in early Zionism between Eurocentric modernism and anti-European anti-modernism. Was Zionism to be part of the Orient or was it to be a movement of European modernity projected into the Middle East?

European Orientalism itself can be divided between those who had actual contact with the Orient and those whose images were constructed much more out of sheer imagination. The French and the English fit loosely into the first category and the Germans into the second. Similarly, Jewish Orientalism divides between those who had direct contact with the Jews of the Middle East and those who did not. Because of the French involvement in the region, French Jews were among the first to develop complex direct relationships with Jews in North Africa, Turkey and other areas of the Ottoman Empire. This new interest in the Orient was awakened by the Damascus Blood Libel in 1840 and, as Aron Rodrigue has shown in recent work, was expressed in the educational network of the Alliance Israélite Universelle.¹³ The Alliance's project of bringing French Enlightenment to the backward Jews of the Ottoman Empire was the product of Orientalist images of these Jews, but it also contributed towards the production and dissemination of these images.

German and East European Jews had less direct contact with Jews of the East, but the images were often similar. Much, although not all, of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century literature on Sabbatianism was produced in German. As we will see, these German Jewish authors often conflated images of the Orient with images of the Ostjuden, who, as Steven Aschheim has shown, functioned for German

Jews in a similar cultural fashion as Oriental Jews.¹⁴ An additional aspect to the German Jewish literature about the Orient is the curious role of the Sephardic Jew. As Ismar Schorsch has argued, Sephardic Jews often served for enlightened German Jews as models of acculturation without assimilation; the Sephardic Jew represented a kind of Jewish nobility, as opposed to the obscurantist and vulgar Ostjuden.¹⁵ With the discovery of the 'degraded' Oriental Jews as an ostensible offshoot of the Sephardim, the image of the Sephardim shifted to a contradictory mixture of nobility and degeneration, a mixture which is particularly evident in the representations of Sabbatianism.

Sabbatianism and the Orient

One example of this ambivalent representation can be found in a travelogue written by the German-Jewish newspaper publisher, Esriel Carlebach, under the title *Exotische Juden*.¹⁶ For Carlebach and, one presumes, his readers, the 'exotic' was the Orient, defined primarily as the Mediterranean. The first chapter treats the 'proud Spaniards' (*Stolze Spanier*), the Sephardic Jews of Salonica. Following the long tradition described by Schorsch, Carlebach contrasts the nobility and pride of these Jews with the 'hunchback' (*gebeugten-Ruckens*) Jews of the North. The Spanish Jews of Salonica set the stage for Carlebach's journeys to other exotic communities of the Orient, including Morocco, Tunis, Tripoli, Yemen and Smyrna. There he found a variety of 'exotic' Jews, not only exotic because of their geographical location, but also because of their heterodox beliefs: Karaites, Marranos and Sabbatians.

Carlebach's Sabbatians are the remains of the Dönme sect in Izmir. He describes the 'half-darkened' synagogue, mysterious and virtually ruined where he encounters old men and women, the vestiges of the community. In contrast with this contemporary scene of decay, Carlebach describes the birth of Sabbatianism in almost revolutionary terms. Shabbtai Zvi was a 'sensitive, ecstatic young man' who dared to duel with God in protest against the slaughter of the Polish Jews by Chmielnitski. Anticipating Scholem and in line with most of the other

descriptions of the impact of Sabbatianism, Carlebach claims that the movement swept the whole Jewish world. Yet, Carlebach blames the failure of Sabbatianism on Shabbtai Zvi who, he says, thought more about himself than about redemption; he was a Messiah not fully committed to messianism.

Carlebach sees the continuing faith of latter-day Sabbatians like Jonathan Eibeschütz and the Dönme sect not as a belief in Shabbtai Zvi himself, but as a belief in the spiritual phenomenon represented by Sabbatianism; it is therefore curiously positive and even prescriptive for modern European Jews: the Dönme Sabbatians read Maupassant and Voltaire, but when they pray, they put away Western literature, just as they do the Koran, speak only Hebrew and refer only to sacred Jewish texts. Like European Jews, many of the sect 'became Greek and married foreigners'. Those who remained faithful had learned the art of dissembling, of seeming to be Muslims while actually remaining Jews. To be able to believe in Shabbtai Zvi nearly three hundred years after his apostasy is a 'trick of the soul' not that different from that required to be a Jew in modern times.

Thus, the movement that began in ecstasy, but failed due to the weakness of its leader, still held a message for Jews facing the challenge of assimilation. In this conclusion, the Sabbatian community of Smyrna represented for Carlebach a peculiar mixture of antiquated decay and stubborn national pride, a combination typical of others of Carlebach's exotic Jews of the Orient.

The role of the Orient as the birthplace of Sabbatianism is evident as well in Josef Kastein's vivid biography, *Shabbtai Zewi: Der Messias von Ismir*, published in Germany in 1930. Kastein's book resembles much of the nineteenth-century literature discussed by Werses in combining historical sources with fictional embellishment. Although Scholem dismissed Kastein's work as little more than a novel, his bibliography includes many of the sources in Hebrew and European languages from the time of the events. Even if Kastein did allow himself poetic license, he did so after some fairly extensive historical research. Seeking to explain the widespread impact of the movement, Kastein argues that,

he succeeded, for the people he was addressing were not only credulous Jews, but also Orientals. In this connection, one should not forget that there were two factors which did much towards increasing credence for the reports that were circulated – in the Orient, the fickle receptivity towards fantasy [*die leichte, phantasie-*

begabte Empfänglichkeit], and in the West the allure of the alien [*der Reiz der Entfernung*] and respect for the written word.¹⁷

If the movement's attraction in the East had to do with Oriental irrationalism, the Western Jews were drawn in by two contradictory impulses: a kind of rationalism connected with respect for written reports, and the enchantment of the exotic. Kastein is describing a kind of seventeenth-century Jewish Orientalism as the source for Western Sabbatianism. But he also captures the reasons for contemporary fascination with Sabbatianism. In the twentieth century, the Orient still represented the exotic, as it did in the seventeenth, but knowledge of the Orient, mediated through the written word (that is, Kastein's own book), gives this exoticism a veneer of scientific respectability. This is exactly the combination that Said describes in his analysis of nineteenth-century European accounts of the Orient.

Despite the impression a passage like this might leave, Kastein was not at all hostile to Sabbatianism. In fact, his attitude was generally quite sympathetic since he saw Sabbatianism as a legitimate response to Jewish homelessness, a theme that he repeats almost like a litany in his introductory chapter. As a Central European Jew, Kastein needed to account for how the more 'rational' and 'skeptical' Jews who were his ancestors were attracted to the movement in a way different from the alien Oriental Jews. For example, in Venice, the news was received with skepticism: 'here is intelligent soil, where much is investigated and much is doubted. Here is no more of the fantastic Oriental imagination'.¹⁸ Similarly, in Hamburg and Amsterdam, the descendants of the Marranos were more fully equipped with spiritual or intellectual (*Geistigen*) qualities than the Polish Jews, because their suffering was 'sublimated'. These Jews, who are clearly Kastein's heroes,

regarded [Sabbatianism] from a more worldly, concrete and political point of view than the Oriental and Polish Jews. To the other Jews it was a fresh beginning; to them it was a continuation on a higher and clearer plane. And in their response they showed passionate joy and unfettered exuberance rather than dark and painful penitential practices.¹⁹

The East – whether Eastern Europe or the Middle East – is dark and ascetical, while the West is joyful and worldly, a theme to which I will return.

Among the political responses to Sabbatianism, Kastein includes Spinoza's famous 'Zionist' passage in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*: Jewish sovereignty might in fact be restored under the proper political constellation.²⁰ In connecting Spinoza with Sabbatianism in this positive sense, Kastein turned Graetz's association of the two on its head: where Graetz had seen Spinoza as the mirror image of Shabbtai Zvi – rationalism versus irrationalism – Kastein brought them together under the category of politics.²¹ Spinoza understood the import of Sabbatianism politically. While it is unlikely that Spinoza was in fact commenting on Sabbatianism in this passage, Kastein may well have been on to something interesting. Following Scholem, much of the work on Sabbatianism has focused primarily on mystical ideas and less on the overtly political side of the movement, such as the persistent use of royal titles for Shabbtai Zvi and the way the movement unfolded within the political relations between the Ottoman Jewish communities and the Turkish state. Interestingly, this fruitful direction for research was anticipated by some of the literature that Scholem dismissed, such as Kastein's work, which typically focuses much more on the political than on the mystical.²²

Despite his identification with the ostensibly reasoned position of the Amsterdam and Hamburg Jews, Kastein was by no means a dogmatic rationalist. In language reminiscent of Martin Buber, he notes that 'an Age is ripe for a great experience [*Erlebnis*], when it has the courage momentarily to abandon the lamentable control of the brain and surrenders oneself to necessities of the heart'.²³ This distinction between brain and heart corresponds to Kastein's dichotomy in his introductory chapter between the Bible, which stirs the emotions, and the rationalism of the Talmud. He saw the Talmud as a legal system of 'endless interpretations, reflections, speculations and theories' that weaned the Jews from the emotional sustenance of the Bible. He even claims that

the rabbis forbade Jews from reading the Bible before age twenty!²⁴ The Kabbalah attempted a synthesis between the Bible and the Talmud, and Shabbtai Zvi represented the great experience in which the dictates of reason were suspended in favor of a higher law. For a secular Jew like Kastein (and Scholem), Sabbatianism was a precursor of the modern revolt against rabbinic legalism.

As for Carlebach, the failure of Sabbatianism was a failure of its leader, who was not himself transformed by this great experience. Here Kastein becomes rather obscure: Shabbtai Zvi 'emulated an historical form of leadership without any adequate spiritual equipment'. He never truly transcended the religion against which he rebelled. In a sense, Kastein holds that Sabbatianism was not radical enough: it did not address the universal desire for redemption, 'the fundamental fact that a whole world wished to be reconciled with its God and its own existence'. This desire for redemption continued to echo weakly in movements like Hasidism and Zionism, but it succeeded in neither; writing in 1930, Kastein, who was himself sympathetic to Zionism and ended up emigrating to Palestine, declared that 'in Zionism, which was an attempt at a partial solution on the plane of reality, it [redemption] met with defeat'.²⁵

Interestingly enough, it was only in the philosophy of Martin Buber that Kastein found the true realization of the idea of redemption and, as we have just seen, there are several places in his book where such Buberian terms as *Erlebnis* and *Zwiesprache* appear. Arguing that 'nothing can so disfigure God's countenance as religion',²⁶ he seems to have believed that Shabbtai Zvi was not able to translate his antinomianism into a true spirituality of dialogue. Might it be that, for Kastein, Shabbtai Zvi's Oriental origins precluded the possibility of such philosophical messianism? Only the spiritual equipment of the Central European Jews, and not the fantastic imaginations of the Oriental or East European Jews, could provide the necessary synthesis between emotion and reason.

If Kastein saw in Shabbtai Zvi's Orientalism the fatal flaw of the movement, the same perhaps was true for Theodor Herzl. A number of early Zionist writers, such as Shai Ish-Hurwitz, drew explicit compari-

sons between Zionism and Sabbatianism and between Herzl and Shabbtai Zvi.²⁷ Herzl himself was evidently uncomfortable with such associations, although he devoted relatively little attention to his ostensible seventeenth-century forerunner. At one point in his diaries Herzl says: 'the difference between Shabbtai Zvi and myself is that he made himself great to be like the great ones of the world, whereas I find the great just as small as I am'.²⁸ This is a rather enigmatic entry, given Herzl's megalomania attested in other places in the diaries.

A more decisive statement of Herzl's position on Sabbatianism, and one more relevant for our purposes, can be found in his utopian novel, *Altneuland*. When his two protagonists return to Palestine after twenty years on a desert island, they tour the now-thriving Jewish utopia. At one point, their hosts propose attending one of the cultural offerings of the colony. The choices are a play about Moses at the 'National Theater', which they reject as too pietistically uplifting, several popular Yiddish farces, which they dismiss as beneath them, and an opera about Shabbtai Zvi, advertised as 'the most beautiful of all modern Jewish operas'. Curious about this figure of whom they claim ignorance, they are told: 'Shabbtai Zvi was a false Messiah who appeared in Turkey at the beginning of the seventeenth century [sic]. He succeeded in gathering a great following among Oriental Jews, but later he became a Moslem and met a sorry end'. The visitors declare: 'The perfect villain for an opera',²⁹ and off the party goes to see the performance.

This brief passage deserves some careful attention. The opera about Shabbtai Zvi stands culturally somewhere between pious 'high' religion, represented by the theatrical treatment of Moses, and the low culture of the Ostjuden, represented by the Yiddish farces. In light of Herzl's dismissal of religion and patronizing attitude towards the Ostjuden, only the theme of a messianic movement can be said to have 'national' significance. The opera treats a theme out of Jewish history

whose value, Herzl suggests, is as a cautionary tale about the pitfalls that Zionism must avoid: although initially sincere, Shabbtai Zvi became a 'villain' as the mob began to follow him. Here is an example of Herzl's own ambivalence about leading a popular movement; his own theory of Zionism as a vanguard suggests rather a certain élitism.

Unlike other contemporary treatments of Sabbatianism, Herzl sees the movement as primarily an Oriental affair, thus implicitly contrasting it with his own movement. In one place in his diaries, Herzl insists that while Sabbatianism was based on utopian fantasy, his movement will succeed since 'we have machines',³⁰ that is, Western technology. For the Jews of the Middle Ages, only fantasies based on charismatic figures might inspire action, while in modern times when the people are able 'to gauge its own strength', miracles and charismatic leaders would no longer be needed. Here, once again, we encounter a certain ambivalence on Herzl's part about his own status as a charismatic leader.

Despite Herzl's explicit distancing from Sabbatianism, expressed in his narrative description of the movement, the capsule libretto of his fictional opera tells a somewhat different story. Shabbtai is persecuted by a 'choir of angry rabbis', but his 'strong personality charmed even his opponents and they fell back before him'. Here, Herzl may have in mind his own controversies with orthodox authorities who opposed his movement and, in fact, he suggests that 'sensible pious Jews' have rejected the 'partisan rabbis' and joined the Zionist movement.

The opera about Shabbtai Zvi is the only place in *Altneuland* – with one exception³¹ – in which Herzl refers to Oriental Jews. The Eurocentric character of Herzl's Zionism is, of course, no great surprise and he was not the only one to suffer from a blind spot about the Orientals, whether Jews or Arabs. But his treatment of Sabbatianism was designed to contrast those backward Jews, whether of the Orient or elsewhere, who believed in miracles and were therefore swept up by false messianism, with an enlightened, modern movement based on technology. The Orient represented for Herzl the religious obscurantism and utopian thinking that Zionism had to oppose. The lack of any identifiable Oriental Jews in the *Altneuland* (as opposed to the presence

of enlightened, pro-Zionist Arabs) suggests that Herzl proposed to ignore rather than modernize the real Jews of the Middle East.

Erotic Messianism and the Orient

In *Altneuland*, Shabbtai Zvi's finest moment comes when a young girl, who is his disciple, tries to defend him 'in a grand aria' and is attacked by rabbis 'in a great rage'. The prophet then returns to save her and she follows him after the rabbis ban him from Smyrna. At this point, Friedrich, the character who might be called Herzl's *alter ego*, stops following the opera when he spies the now decrepit woman he had been in love with twenty years earlier and as a result of whose betrayal he had left Europe. The contrast between the manly, charismatic Shabbtai Zvi and the jilted Friedrich is clear: the European Jew cannot find his erotic fulfillment in Europe, for the woman of his initial dreams will turn into a middle-aged hag. Only by the end of the novel does Friedrich find true romantic fulfillment in Miriam, the daughter of the Jewish colony in the Orient.³²

In his fictional opera about Shabbtai Zvi, Herzl never exploits the erotic possibilities of Sabbatianism. The young female disciple is described only as following Shabbtai and not as his romantic partner. In this chaste presentation, Herzl may, in fact, be suggesting his own repressed ambivalence about the erotic energies inherent in leading a great political movement. Yet, Herzl's avoidance of explicit eroticism left him very much in the minority, for most of the writers about Shabbtai Zvi from our period focused disproportionate attention on the erotic and, not surprisingly, on Eros linked to the Orient.

One aspect of the Orient as imagined by Orientalists has almost invariably been its effeminate sensuality, personified, as Said demonstrates, in Flaubert's courtesan, Kuchuk Hanem.³³ For Jewish Orientalists, the Sabbatian movement provided a rich opportunity for imagining an Oriental eroticism within the traditional Jewish world. This opportunity was a result of the stories that circulated already in the seven-

teenth century about Shabbtai Zvi's marriages, the first two unconsummated and the third to the mysterious Sarah, who some accounts claim was a Polish orphan of the Chmielnitski pogroms and who had pursued an adventurous and promiscuous life before marrying Shabbtai Zvi in Egypt. The figure of Sarah allowed authors to conflate East Europe with the Near East. Thus, for example, Kastein calls this 'eccentric, erotic and uncommonly vital creature' a 'child of the East'.³⁴ Kastein claims that the rabbinical response to Sarah's eroticism was similar to that of the Christian witch trials, but it never reached quite the same extreme: the Christians 'hated Eros and stifled the weird sensations provoked by witches by putting them to death. The Jewish rabbis and scholars were also afraid of Eros, but they tried to circumvent it by sublimating its influence'.³⁵ In any event, Shabbtai himself was never tempted by Sarah's seductions and Kastein argues, quite implausibly, that he no more consummated this third marriage than he had the previous two. We recall that for Kastein the spirit of the Orient was ascetic, and in his account Shabbtai Zvi never gives in personally to the erotic. However, Sarah instigates orgies and has relations with Shabbtai's young followers. She also agitates for equality of women at Shabbtai's table and in the reading of the Torah. At her instigation and as a tactic for gaining power, Shabbtai adopted a proto-feminist position, freeing women from the curse of Eve. As a result, says Kastein, women took an active part in the movement, 'as sometimes happens in the case of revolutions when feminine instinct, added to the deliberations and motives of men, acts as a liberating and inciting factor'.³⁶ Whether or not one wants to accept Kastein's dubious claim for the liberatory nature of 'feminine instinct', his observation of the importance of women in the movement deserves further investigation.³⁷

Other authors exploited the erotic possibilities of Shabbtai's marriages to the hilt. Israel Zangwill's 1898 anthology, *Dreamers of the Ghetto*, contains a chapter on 'The Turkish Messiah' among other fictional and factual tales of marginal Jews. Zangwill revels in Orientalist imagery throughout his tale:

Obediently marrying [...] the maiden provided by his father the young ascetic passionately denied himself to the passion ripened precociously by the Eastern sun and the marvelling *Beth-Din* released the virgin from her nominal husband. Prayer and self-mortification were the pleasures of his youth. The enchanting Jewesses of Smyrna, picturesque in baggy trousers and open-necked vests, had no seduction for him, though no muslin veil hid their piquant countenances as with the Turkish women, though no prescription silenced their sweet voices in the psalmody of the table, as among the sin-fearing congregations of the West.³⁸

The Orient is the sun-drenched land of sensuality and liberation, the Jewish women seductive and available, unlike either the Muslims or the women of the Western Jewish communities. Shabbtai denies himself these pleasures, but his asceticism is itself a 'passionate' denial of the passions. Sarah comes to free him from his self-abnegation:

She was clad in shimmering white Italian silk, which draped tightly about her bosom, showed her as some gleaming statue [...] Her eyes had strange depths of passion, perfumes breathed from her skin. [...] Not thus came the maidens of Israel to wedlock, demure, spotless, spiritless, with shorn hair, priestesses of the ritual of the home.³⁹

There can be little doubt that Zangwill prefers this 'Oriental' Jewess to the more conventional domestic 'priestesses' of Western Jewry. Sarah declares to Shabbtai: 'Thou hast kept thyself pure for me even as I have kept myself passionate for thee. Come, thou shalt make me pure and I will make thee passionate'.⁴⁰

Zangwill plays out Shabbtai's conversion to Islam as a struggle between the *yin* of his divinity and the *yang* of her worldliness. Shabbtai at first blames Sarah for his failure to embrace martyrdom:

'Tis through thee that I have forfeited the divine grace [...] Thou hast made me unfaithful to my bride the Law [...] Woman, thou has polluted me! I have lost the divine spirit. It hath gone out from

me; it will incarnate itself in another, in a nobler. Once I was Messiah, now I am man.⁴¹

Then he reverses himself and embraces love as 'the Kingdom' and his humanity as his true destiny. He is now prepared to become a Muslim, if only to live with Sarah: 'I am a man, and thou a woman'. But Sarah for her part declares that if Shabbtai is only a man, then her love for him is dead: 'Nay, as a man, I love thee not. Thou art divine or naught'.⁴² Then, when he is taken to the Sultan, she realizes that she has come to love him as a man and not only as Messiah. Zangwill produces this struggle between Shabbtai and Sarah with a great deal of ambiguity, neither allowing his characters to take a definitive position on the apostasy, nor, it would seem, taking one himself either.

Dreamers of the Ghetto was Zangwill's attempt to work out a Jewish identity on the margins by identifying with other heterodox Jews. It is also a surreptitious struggle with Christianity, as the poem on the frontispiece, entitled 'Moses and Jesus', attests. Moses and Jesus, the two Jews who 'met by chance':

Then for the first time met their eyes, swift-linked
In one strange, silent, piteous gaze, and dim
With bitter tears of agonized despair.

The encounter between Judaism and Christianity has no positive, definitive outcome as it would in Zangwill's later, assimilationist play, *The Melting Pot*,⁴³ but, instead, like Shabbtai Zvi's conversion to Islam, it is fraught with ambiguity and 'agonized despair'.

The very ambiguity of the ending of his Sabbatian chapter signals Zangwill's own ambivalence about whether a Jewish identity was even possible in the modern world. Within a few years, he was to become engaged to and marry a non-Jewish woman, an act which earned him the opprobrium of a number of his friends in Jewish and Zionist circles.⁴⁴ Perhaps Shabbtai Zvi's struggle between ascetic purity and Juda-

ism on the one hand, and erotic worldliness and apostasy on the other was a projection of Zangwill's own inner struggles. In this light, it is no surprise that he invested his account of Shabbtai Zvi with such melodramatic sensuality and romance, a tale of the passionate Orient far removed from the straitlaced Jews of late nineteenth century England.

The intersection of eroticism, interfaith relations and the Orient appears as well in Sholem Ash's 1908 Yiddish play *Shabbtai Zvi*. Ash's admittedly mediocre melodrama cannot be divorced from its author's preoccupation with Christianity, which, several decades later, would result in such controversial works as *Der Man fun Natseres*. Ash's Shabbtai Zvi is announced in phrases reminiscent of the Christian appropriation of the prophecy of Isaiah (7:14): 'The voice of God came to me thus: "A son is born to Mordecai in the city of Izmir in the East, near the sea. And I have called him Shabbtai Zevi"'⁴⁵ The several references to Izmir as 'the East' in Act 1 are revealing because the setting is supposed to be Jerusalem, relative to which Izmir would be in the West. It is, of course, the author and his audience who are in the West and for whom Izmir, Jerusalem and, indeed, the whole drama of Sabbatianism, all lie in the Orient.

But, of course, the Orient is also important for Ash as the site of Jesus' origins. His comparison of Shabbtai to Jesus in the opening Act is reinforced later in the play by Shabbtai's claim that 'I have torn the human from my heart and have become God', and Sarah's statement that Shabbtai is a 'Man-God', formulations that have no basis in Sabbatian theology, although they do appear in other nineteenth-century imaginative literature about Shabbtai Zvi.⁴⁶ For Ash, it seems, Sabbatianism was a seventeenth-century version of Jewish Christianity, an episode in Jewish history that might perhaps make Jews more understanding of the Christian heresy. For if, as he suggests in his monumental novel of the life of Jesus, Judaism and Christianity differ only in whether one believes that the Messiah has already come, then the Sabbatian experience means that many Jews also once believed in an historical Messiah.

Ash's account of Shabbtai's failure is, however, theologically confusing. At one point, Shabbtai blames God for having sent him, but then having taken fright at how people considered him like a god, retracted Shabbtai's divine powers. Much of the dialogue in the latter part of the play focuses the blame on Sarah, the erotic seductress who, as in Zangwill's story, represents sensual worldliness in opposition to Shabbtai's spirituality.

Shabbtai's first two, rejected wives, significantly named Leah and Rachel, refer to Sarah as 'the black queen' and Ash attributes to her the urge towards antinomianism. In one speech, she castigates the Torah as a set of prohibitions given by 'foreign gods' and pleads with Shabbtai to choose her as a bride rather than the Torah, since she represents a Nietzschean mixture of 'sin, death [...] repentance, resurrection, anger and reconciliation, loneliness and companionship, desire and negation'.⁴⁷ It is Sarah who attracts followers to the movement by her eyes, her hair and her passion, and she does so precisely because she is human, a 'daughter of the Earth', but also the emissary of Satan. Despite her Eastern European origins, Sarah is depicted as Oriental, promising Shabbtai a paradise made of Middle Eastern imagery, drawn in part from the language of the Song of Songs.⁴⁸ In the end, Shabbtai has been irrevocably contaminated by Sarah's sensuality and he surrenders to his humanity by converting to Islam. The scene of his apostasy ends with the Sultan promising him his most beautiful slave girls as wives. The Orient triumphs.

Like Zangwill, Ash ends his play in ambiguity. Where does he really stand on the choice between the Torah and Sarah as the Messiah's bride? Can Jewish messianism sustain the idea of a 'man-God' without collapsing either into antinomian sensuality or ascetic spirituality? The play gives no definitive answers, but it certainly suggests how perilous the course is for those Jews who reject the strictures of the law for a more worldly (modern?) existence, represented, here as elsewhere, by the sensuous Orient. If, indeed, sensuality is a sign of modernity, then the Orient here is pressed into an unexpected role as the site of modern virtues.

The erotic implications of Shabbtai Zvi's biography were not discovered first by writers of the *fin de siècle* and, in fact, these writers probably borrowed from earlier nineteenth-century models. S. Meschelssohn's

Sabbathey Zwy, for example, published in 1856, demonstrates as much fascination with Shabbtai's asceticism in his first two marriages as with his later consummated marriage to the mysterious Sarah. Meschelssohn exaggerates Shabbtai's rejection of a first wife named Rachel by describing in exquisite detail Rachel's beauty and her attempts to seduce the celibate Messiah. One has the sense in this novel, as in others as well, that Shabbtai's initial celibacy and later presumed libertinism, as alien as both were to conventional Jewish marriage, exerted equal erotic attraction.

Perhaps the most bizarre instance of erotic exploitation of Shabbtai Zvi's biography is a novella written by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch,⁴⁹ best known as the author of the sadomasochistic work of pornography, *Venus in Furs* (the sexologist Richard Krafft-Ebbing invented the term 'masochism' from Sacher-Masoch's name, just as he invented 'sadism' from the Marquis de Sade). Sacher-Masoch was both a pornographer (at least in twentieth-century terms) and a writer of *Ghettogeschichten* (romanticized stories of the ghetto).⁵⁰ Sacher-Masoch's *Shabbtai Zewy* is a fascinating reworking of the Shabbtai Zvi story for modern purposes. Drawing on earlier literature, Sacher-Masoch suggests that Shabbtai Zvi deliberately chose beautiful wives to put his asceticism to the test and, like Meschelssohn, he embellishes on the erotic attempts of his two first wives, named here Sarah and Hannah, to seduce the young Kabbalist.

It is with the third wife, named mistakenly (but perhaps, as we shall see, intentionally) Miriam, that Sacher-Masoch interjects his own sexual inclinations. Unlike the previous wives, Miriam's tactic is to forbid her husband to touch her rather than to seduce him. As might be the case for any good masochist, this only inflames him. Miriam sees her task as converting Shabbtai from a 'saint into a man', since she no longer believes that he is the Messiah. To convince him of this, she must force him into sin. Claiming to be overcome by the spirit of God, she

leads Shabbtai to the river and forces him to bathe her in a remarkably erotic scene. She then takes him into a garden where she binds a crown of thorns around his head until he bleeds and proceeds to flagellate him with a thorn branch. After this sadomasochistic scene, Miriam tells him: 'I have made you a man, you saint. [...] Shabbtai Zewy you are not the savior of Israel, you are not the Messiah'. Shabbtai then converts to Islam and lives out his days as a Moslem practicing the Jewish religion in secret.

Sacher-Masoch mixes his own sexual proclivities here with religious allegory. He regards Shabbtai Zvi as deluded because of his sexual asceticism. He must be transformed from an ascetic saint into a man and this can only be accomplished by a domineering woman. The release of Shabbtai's sexuality, which symbolizes his return to humanity, is connected with sin: conversion to Islam. Yet, as in Ash's drama, Shabbtai's treatment also conjures up associations of Christianity, particularly in the crown of thorns and, perhaps, with the name Miriam, not as mother of the Messiah, but as his wife. For Sacher-Masoch, Christ seems to have represented the incarnation of God in an inverted sense: the turning of religion into worldliness. From other writings, it appears that Sacher-Masoch tried to construct a kind of secularized Christianity in which redemption consists in accepting and even rejoicing in the cruelties of this world. It is possible that Sacher-Masoch intended the Shabbtai Zvi story as an allegory of the modern Jewish problem: Jews must give up their ostensibly ascetic separatism in favor of his vision of worldliness, represented by women. In fact, in many of Sacher-Masoch's *Ghetto-geschichten*, it is powerful Jewish women who are the forces of modernization and enlightenment.

The figure of Sarah, as a Jewish woman who, according to some accounts, was converted temporarily to Christianity, allowed writers to explore the relationship between Judaism and its Christian offspring. Some writers, such as Kastein, went so far as to claim that Christian millenarianism actually inspired the Sabbatian movement. For all the writers I have discussed, the Sabbatian episode could be exploited as a site for working out problems of Jewish identity in the modern world, and particularly the boundaries between Judaism and Christianity. And, women repeatedly played a critical role in their works as the catalysts for transgressing those boundaries.

A final example of this complex of ideas which I should like to treat is Jacob Wassermann's *Die Juden von Zirndorf*, first published in 1897. Wassermann is often considered an assimilationist, a contention that

has recently been challenged.⁵¹ Although severely critical of both Western and Eastern European Jews, Wassermann extolled by contrast the Oriental Jew as 'certain of himself, of the world, of humankind. [...] He is free, while they are slaves, he lives with his mother, he rests and creates, while they are the eternally wandering unchangeables'.⁵² As Michael Brenner has pointed out, Wassermann, although not a Zionist, claimed hyperbolically that the lengthy prologue of his book, which is a fictional account of the impact of Sabbatianism on the Jews of Franconia, was 'one of the most important causes of the emergence of the entire Zionist movement'.⁵³

Many of the themes that we have already encountered – eroticism, Jewish-Christian relations and, more indirectly, the Orient – inform Wassermann's story. As in Isaac Bashevis Singer's 1935 novel, *Satan in Goray*, the Jews, believing that the Messiah had come, throw off all legal restraints, abandon their religion and indulge in wild sexual orgies, including lesbianism. Two women are at the center of the story: Zirle, who is modeled on the historical Sarah, except that she never actually marries Shabbtai Zevi, and Rachel, who conceives a child out of relations with a Christian seminarian. Zirle is said to be the Messiah's bride, but after Shabbtai Zvi's apostasy, she vanishes forever. Her wild beauty attracts the son of an anti-Semitic Pastor, named Wagenseil (after the anti-Jewish Christian Hebraist), who converts to Judaism and brings catastrophe upon the Jews.

Rachel, on the other hand, is the daughter of a materialistic usurer, described by Wassermann in terms indistinguishable from those of contemporary anti-Semites. Wassermann says of Rachel: 'she could not be called beautiful but she had the opulent figure and superficial passionateness of the Jewess and there was in her eyes some dull sensuous gleam that drew the men to her'.⁵⁴ Her Christian lover puts out a story that she has conceived her child as a virgin and that the child is destined to be the Messiah's bride, a kind of parody of Christianity. Thus, a cer-

tain dramatic tension is set up between Zirle and Rachel's child. As the Jews travel towards the East in response to Shabbtai's call, Rachel gives birth, but to a boy, which causes her opportunistic father to go insane.

Wassermann seems to be suggesting in this episode that the Jews are incapable of realizing their deepest desires, whether it be for sexual relations with Christians or for the coming of the Messiah: 'The dark God of the Jews was not to be jested with; he stretched out his cruel hand till it stood like a wall cutting them off from the sweet and seductive prospects conjured up by an oriental imagination'.⁵⁵ The messianic liberation of the European Jews, originating out of the Orient, fell victim to the cruel dictates of (Western?) Judaism, which had irrevocably distorted the character of the Jews.

Yet, anticipating Scholem, Wassermann suggests that Sabbatianism, the abortive movement of liberation from the East, formed the great watershed between the Middle Ages and modernity, serving, as in Carlebach's tale of the Dönmeh sect, as a model for the modern Jew:

And what came was always greater, freer and more perfect than what had gone before and the Jew, at first only a bondsman, fit to suffer the kicks of his angry lord, opened his eyes, discovered the weaknesses and guessed the secrets of his master. [...] Shabbtai became a Moslem, though some say but outwardly. The Jew became a civilized man, and again some say but outwardly. [...] This is certain: an actor or a true man, capable of beauty, yet ugly, lustful and ascetic, a charlatan or a gambler, a fanatic or a cowardly slave – the Jew is all these things. [...] the nature of a people is like the nature of an individual: its character is its fate.⁵⁶

In his autobiography, *Mein Leben als Deutscher und Jude*, Wassermann, torn between his Jewish and German identities, describes his need to see the Jews as neither totally saintly nor totally materialistic, but rather a human synthesis of all extremes. As the above passage suggests, underneath the modern Jew's 'civilized' exterior lurked all the complexities of the Jew's real identity. Sabbatianism itself was the first movement of liberation that created this modern bifurcated identity. For Wassermann, writing *Die Juden von Zirndorf* was also an act of personal liberation,⁵⁷ an attempt to reconcile his Jewish and German

identities. Story-telling, which he calls 'an Oriental instinct in my blood',⁵⁸ functioned for Wassermann as his personal form of Sabbatian liberation, an attempt to reconnect with the Oriental Jews he so admired.

Wassermann's *Die Juden von Zirndorf* brings us back to Scholem. In the July 28, 1915 entry to his diary,⁵⁹ Scholem relates an intense discussion he had of Wassermann's novel with his friend, Meta Jahr. As a book written not out of literary impulses, but rather the 'necessity of the soul' (*Seelennot*), Scholem describes *Die Juden von Zirndorf* as, together with Herzl's life, the two monuments, two myths of Jewish suffering from the nineties of the nineteenth century. Wassermann had provided a myth for the Western Jews; another would be needed for the Jews of the East.

Scholem does not clarify exactly what he found so 'mythical' in Wassermann's novel and it would perhaps be hasty to conclude that the long Sabbatian prologue was what particularly drew his interest. Yet, his preoccupation with questions of Jewish national redemption, attested repeatedly in the diary entries from these years, as well as the early reference to Shabbtai Zvi mentioned above, suggest that Sabbatianism could not have been far from his mind. At the same time, Scholem was equally obsessed with longings for the Orient. Part of this longing came from Martin Buber's essay on 'Judaism and the Orient', which exercised a powerful early influence on the young Scholem. But it also stemmed from his disillusionment with Germany, fed in part by his revulsion at German war fever, and with his belief that personal salvation, like salvation for the Jews, lay in the East.⁶⁰ As he wrote on December 11, 1915,

It is clear that I would like to be away from here, but would I not like just as much to go to Arabia, Persia, China, the Orient? I have in me a great love for the Orient and believe that Eretz Israel can only enjoy its resurrection [*Auferstehung*] in conjunction with the rest of the Orient. But I also believe that while I wish to journey to the Orient, I wish to live in Eretz Israel. And this is the difference.⁶¹

If one can draw conclusions from this passage, Scholem's early relationship to the Orient was marked by ambivalence: the Orient would be the site for Zionism to establish itself outside of Europe, but Eretz Israel would nevertheless be different. How, we might ask, did this difference play itself out in Scholem's historiography, especially his work on Sabbatianism? Can we identify an Orientalist dimension to his reading of Shabbtai Zvi?

On the face of it, the more obvious hallmarks of Orientalism that we have discovered in the fiction and popular histories about Sabbatianism are absent from Scholem's work. To take one example, he devoted relatively little attention to the erotic side of the Shabbtai Zvi's biography, especially by contrast to the more popular writers.⁶² Similarly, the role of women as early followers of Shabbtai Zvi, which we have seen in a number of accounts, failed to attract his interest. The Sabbatian movement remained for him largely a male affair. This one-sided focus corresponds to his more general position on the role of women in Jewish mysticism,⁶³ which he stated at the beginning of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*:

The long history of Jewish mysticism shows no trace of feminine influence. [...] [Kabbalah], therefore, lacks the element of feminine emotion which has played so large a part in the development of non-Jewish mysticism, but it also remained comparatively free from the dangers entailed by the tendency toward hysterical extravagance which followed in the wake of this influence.⁶⁴

If the ostensibly effeminate qualities of 'hysterical' emotionalism and 'extravagance' are those commonly associated with the Orient, Scholem was seemingly determined to portray Jewish mysticism as 'non-Oriental'. Yet, as Gil Anidjar has persuasively argued, such overtly 'anti-Orientalist' statements may well conceal a more subtle, quite possibly unconscious Orientalist agenda in the field of Kabbalistic

historiography.⁶⁵ Like others who wrote on Sabbatianism, Scholem focused on the curious bouts of passivity which Shabbtai Zvi exhibited, explaining them with a diagnosis of manic-depression. Yet, how far is such modern clinical language from the less clinical 'hysterical extravagance'? Isn't this passivity exactly the kind of 'effeminacy' typically associated with the Orient? Similarly, Scholem associates the degeneracy of the later Frankist movement with its explicitly 'feminine' theology, which may explain his surprising expressions of revulsion at this eighteenth-century by-product of Sabbatianism: one of the 'most frightening phenomenon in the whole of Jewish history: a religious leader who [...] was in all his actions a truly corrupt and degenerate individual'.⁶⁶

One might extend this analysis further. Scholem's interpretation of Sabbatianism as first and foremost a mystical movement has been accepted as virtually canonical. Yet, as we have seen, it is possible to offer a political interpretation in which the Kabbalistic theology of the movement is no longer primary. According to the typical Orientalist view, the West is the realm of politics and reason, the East of impotent mysticism and emotionalism. By attributing such weight to the mystical and virtually ignoring the political, Scholem perhaps unwittingly painted a portrait of Sabbatianism that was almost quintessentially Orientalist.

The obvious response to this suggestion is that, for Scholem, mysticism was anything but pejorative and Sabbatianism itself was to be given pride of place in the dialectic of Jewish history. Yet, my hypothesis that Scholem's reading of Sabbatianism may have involved Orientalist ambivalence can help solve one of the central tensions in his thought. As is well known, Scholem was politically active in the Brit Shalom group in the 1920s. In his polemics against the Revisionists, he repeatedly labeled these extreme nationalists 'latter-day Sabbatians'. He used almost identical language at the end of his life to describe the religious Zionists of the Gush Emunim.⁶⁷ How can one reconcile his positive historiographical estimation of Sabbatianism with this use of the term as a politically pejorative remark?

The answer, it seems to me, lies in the ambivalence of the European Orientalist who is at once fascinated and repelled by the mysterious East. Scholem famously called Zionism a 'retreat back into history' and denied that it should have anything to do with apocalyptic messianism.⁶⁸ Zionism meant a turn to politics and not to mysticism. In this respect, for Scholem, Zionism was quintessentially a Western movement of political rationality and pragmatism, a 'male' movement, if one wishes, as opposed to the 'female' extravagance of the East. Despite his efforts to purge Jewish mysticism of the 'feminine' element and Sabbatianism of its female side, his unease about their possible recurrence in Zionism demonstrates the anxiety of the European confronting the ambiguities of the Orient.

In this respect, despite the sophistication and erudition of his research on Sabbatianism, Scholem remained in the same Orientalist universe of discourse as the many popular works on Shabbtai Zvi that proliferated early in the century: the messianic movement out of the East became the site for projection of the struggles and anxieties of a generation living between tradition and modernity.