Chapter 2
Sleeping with a Prophet:
On the Erotic Adventures of
Rabbi Meir

Daniel Boyarin

In a typical hagiographical account written for pious Israeli children, we find the story of how Rabbi Meir, arguably the greatest of the tannaim (2nd century CE), became known as Rabbi Meir the Wonderworker, a name and status that he bears until this day. It seems that his sister-in-law was in prison, and he went to rescue her, discovered that she had not sinned in prison, and performed miracles to get her out. Upon being pursued by soldiers, Rabbi Meir entered a treyf restaurant, stuck his finger in the food, licked another finger, and by this ruse convinced his pursuers that he couldn’t possibly be the great Rabbi. He then ran away to Babylonia to escape his oppressors. No sex, or even much gender, in this story for youthful modern ears.\(^1\) The version in the Babylonian Talmud (c. 6th century CE) is considerably juicier:

Beruria, the wife of Rabbi Meir, was the daughter of Rabbi Hanina. She said to him: It is painful to me that my sister is sitting in a prostitute’s booth. He took a targum of dinars and went, saying if she has done nothing wrong [i.e., if she is sexually innocent], a miracle will take place for me, and if not, there will be no miracle. He dressed up as a soldier and solicited her. She said: I am menstruating. He said: I can wait. She said: There are many here more beautiful than I. He said: I understand from this that she has done nothing wrong. He went to her guard: Give her to me! The guard said: I am afraid of the king. He [Meir] took the targum of dinars, and gave it to him, and said: Take the targum of dinars. Keep half and use half for bribing anyone who comes. He [the guard] said: What shall I do when they are gone? He [Meir] said: Say “God of Meir answer me; God of Meir answer me,” and you will be saved. He [guard] said: How do I know that this will be so? He [Meir] said: [Now you will see.] There came some dogs that eat people. He shouted to them, and they came to eat him. He said: God of Meir

\(^1\) N. Ts. Goldh, Rabbi Hananya Bar Hama; Rabbi Ishmael Ben Efshar; Rabbi Meir the Miracle Worker, Adire Ha-Torah (Yerushalayim: Mehkon “Bet Yehi’el”, 1983), 130–34.
The narrative incorporates themes familiar from late antiquity and especially the narrative patterns of the adventure story and the erotic tale. David Stern has already noted how little attention has been paid to the impact of Greco-Roman narrative on rabbinic literature, and begun in his article to provide a major corrective to this fault, focusing especially on one of the genres so important for this story, the erotic and adventure narrative. As Stern has pointed out the Greco-Roman novel is "actually a love-and-venture story." The story of Rabbi Meir is both of these as well, and thus can be seen as part of the great literary movement of the first through the sixth centuries that brought us the Greek and Roman novels and the literature known as Menippian satire.

In this short narrative we find packed an incredible number of themes and motifs that characterize the work characterized by Mikhail Bakhtin has written of the menippean novel. It is the organic combination of even a mystical-religious crude slum naturalism. Their road, in brothels, in the erotic orgies of secret courts, Rabbi Meir with his sair; elements of miracle work a pious and lofty, edifying mixture of novelistic semitic and parodic Gospel.

The sexual incident in Hellenistic literature, for Stern has shown for the Milesian tales. There is a slander in which Apollo to a sexual slander ago fell prey to sexual passio in Babylonia under rather similar into the significance and men. Unless we take the sexual there primarily and simp and keep her reading, they have an important ideological basis in this.

In the present piece, Comparing Parthenia suggests that in the form through which their leav- is explicitly represented

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2 I have produced a composite text from two excellent Sephardic witnesses: MS. Paris 437 and JTS 15. The Paris ms. has some excellent readings in a literary point of view but is corrupt in other places, where I have filled in from the JTS ms. Nothing in this argument would suffer if only one or the other of the texts were adhered to.

3 David Stern, "The Captive Woman: Hellenization, Greco-Roman Erotic Narrative, and Rabbinic Literature," Poetics Today 19.1 (1998), 91–92. At about the time that Stern was publishing his article, Joshua Levinson made the same point, writing that "the adoption and adaptation of Greco-Roman literary models in midrashic literature" had received little attention, Joshua Levinson, "The Tragedy of Romance: A Case of Literary Exile," Harvard Theological Review 89.3 (1996), 228.

4 Stern, op. cit., 93.

5 In the longer article from which this text was excerpted (and then expanded in its own right), this point will be argued at length (Daniel Boyarin, "Patron Saint of the Incongruous: Rabbi Meir, The Talmud, and Menippian Satire," Critical Inquiry, forthcoming). The "genres"—if they are that—are not in any way exclusive of each other. Nor do they exclude others. Petronius’s Satyricon, just to take one example, is both a classic example of an ancient novel, a Menippian Satire, and a Symposium all together.
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motifs that characterize the kind of late ancient literature called menippea as characterized by Mikhail Bakhtin: sex, fantasy, and religion all together. Bakhtin has written of the menippea, 4 "A very important characteristic of the menippea is the organic combination within it of the free fantastic, the symbolic, at times even a mystical-religious element with an extreme and (from our point of view) crude shum naturalism. The adventures of truth on earth take place on the high road, in brothels, in the dens of thieves, in taverns, marketplace, prisons, in the erotic orgies of secret cults, and so forth." The reason that this story crowned Rabbi Meir with his saint's crown in the Jewish tradition is owing to its several elements of miracle working. Rabbi Meir's sainthood, however, was not won in a pious and lofty, edifying tale, but rather in a riotous hodgepodge of a parodic mixture of novelistic sexual incident, shum-realism—to use Bakhtin's pungent term—, parodic Gospel and other comic elements.

The sexual incident in Rabbi Meir's story connects his legend with other Hellenistic literature, to such texts as Parthenius (along the lines of that which Stern has shown for other rabbinic passages in his article), Philostratus, and Milesian tales. 8 There is an important parallel in Philostratus, namely a reported slander in which Apollonius the holy man allegedly runs away to Scythia owing to a sexual slander against him, "though he never once visited Scythia or fell prey to sexual passion," closely paralleling Rabbi Meir's absconding for Babylonia under rather similar circumstances. It is entirely legitimate to inquire into the significance and import of such incidents recurring in the lives of holy men. Unless we take the reductive route of assuming that erotic material is there primarily and simply to provide titillation, to maintain the reader's interest and keep her reading, this type of incident ought to be seen as carrying some important ideological baggage in the literary practices of narrative during this period.

In the present piece, I would like to unpack some of that freight.

Comparing Parthenius's The Love Romances to rabbinic literature, Stern suggests that in the former, "the erotic ordeal is the primary mode of contact through which their leading characters engage the larger world, a world that is explicitly represented as both sexually charged and dangerous." He goes on

6 The term, "menippea," as opposed to Menippean Satire, is, I think, Bakhtin's own coinage, referring to what is for me the most useful notion of a trans-genrecol transtextual collection of Menippean elements, modified through time and place.


to say that, “it is precisely these elements of the erotic narrative that became for the Rabbis the essential building blocks of a cultural narrative, a kind of myth or foundational story that helped them explain to themselves their place in the pagan world and their uneasy relationship to that world; indeed, in its transformed shape, this narrative became for the Rabbis one through which they represented their understanding of cultural influence itself.”10 As Lauri Davis memorably put it, “The Rabbis portrayed themselves as virgins in a brothel.”11 Making a point similar to that of Stern but focusing much more specifically, Virginia Burrus writes that, “in both the pagan and the Christian novel, I suggest, the presentation of a virginalized eroticism reflects deep ambivalence about the violence of imperial rule.”12 How does the “virginalized eroticism” of our own Rabbi Meir anecdote work out (of) its own ambivalences?

The plot of this little novella of Rabbi Meir and his sister-in-law turns on three incidents of miraculous escape: The first is a miracle done for the sake of the damsel in distress, the second to save the prison-guard, and the third to save Rabbi Meir’s skin.

Turning first to the second of the miracles, I find evidence that one of the areas of pressure or cultural tensions that is being confronted in our romance written small is indeed the place of Rabbis in a Christian world. This miracle by which the guard is saved seems deeply parodic of the passion narratives. As shown by Naomi Koltun-Fromm, the passion narratives are built in a not insignificant way on a Christological midrash on Psalm 22.13 Our little story of the guard being hung on the cross, saying some strange words in a foreign language, and being taken down from the cross suggests, in turn, a parody of the Gospel passion accounts. Indeed, I would circumspectly suggest that this text is closely related to the Babylonian Aramaic parodic Gospels known of as Toledot Yeshu, the story of Jesus. Although best known from the gnomic period, slightly later than the Talmud, their earliest forms are to be found in the Talmud (mostly self-censored) as well. There is a strong argument for this parodic appropriation in verse in the chapter of make nothing: 21, “Deli of the dog.” It is almost you and I raise you one. I that “stumped” you. The answer me” may certain known sequence in Mark.

“Ha! You who destroy and come down from t among themselves with (32). Let the Christ, the may see and believe him When the sixth hour has the ninth hour. (34) At the Elb, hana sabachthani?” have you forsaken me? it, said, “Behold, he is c vinegar, put it on a reed see whether Elijah com voice, and gave up the s

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10 Stern, op. cit., 99. See too Levinson, op. cit., 233–34 for an interpretation in which it was the separation/reunion plot that particularly appealed to the Rabbis as a way of articulating their own historical position with respect to God.
parodic appropriation in the curious incident of the dogs. This is based on a verse in the chapter of Psalms of which the Christological midrashists could make nothing: 21, “Deliver my life from the sword; my soul from the power of the dog.” It is almost as if our parodic narrator says to the Christians, I see you and I raise you one. I will produce a midrash on that verse too, on the verse that “stumped” you. The words that the guard is taught to say, “Eloah d’Meir, answer me” may certainly embody a parodic allusion to the following well-known sequence in Mark’s passion narrative (15) or a version close to it:

“Ha! You who destroy the temple, and build it in three days, (30) save yourself, and come down from the cross!” (31) Likewise, also the chief priests mocking among themselves with the scribes said, “He saved others. He can’t save himself. (32) Let the Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, that we may see and believe him.” Those who were crucified with him insulted him. (33) When the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. (34) At the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, “Eloah, Eloah, lama sabacthani?” which is, being interpreted, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (35) Some of those who stood by, when they heard it, said, “Behold, he is calling Elijah.” (36) One ran, and filling a sponge full of vinegar, put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Let him be. Let’s see whether Elijah comes to take him down.” (37) Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and gave up the spirit. (38)

There is, as I have remarked, sufficient sound parallel, at least to suggest, that the talmudic phrase is a parody of the Aramaic of Jesus’ cry from the cross. The guard, instead of saying, of course, “Eloah, Eloah, lama sabacthani?” says “Eloah d’meir amen!” The sonar echo is, I reckon, just close enough to set up the parodic allusion, an allusion amplified by the presence of Elijah as well in the story of Rabbi Meir’s own miraculous escape in the brothel.14 Just as Jesus was misunderstood, so the guard’s strange words were also not understood, but while in the case of Jesus it did not avail him, in the case of the guard it is precisely these strange words that lead to his salvation in a highly comic manner. It is not inapposite to see here also a self-ironizing comment in which the appearance of the “miracle” wrought by the “saintly” Rabbi Meir is explained by the most rationalistic and comic of means.

There is, perhaps, some further evidence for this conjecture in another tale closely related to Rabbi Meir if not quite about him. In a further sequence of tales, Rabbi Meir’s heretical teacher, the famous Elisha the son of Abuya, is the protagonist. In that story, Elisha seeks to know his fate by using a typical Jewish form of oracle: he asks a child studying to read out the verse which he

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14 As pointed out to me by Virginia Burrus.
is studying at the moment. The child reads: “And to the wicked one God says; What business have you with declaring my statutes or taking my covenant in your mouth?” (Psalms 50. 16). The child, we are told, however, stuttered, so instead of hearing the word “to the wicked one,” l'arashnu, our Elisha hears “to Elisha,” lehisha and, since the previous verse reads “And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me,” our Elisha despairs of his salvation. In the Gospel story it is one prophet’s name that is misheard and in the Talmud, another prophet’s name, one that, moreover, is so closely related: Elijah and Elisha. Is it too much of a conjecture to argue from here that the Babylonian Rabbis were aware of this Gospel tradition, if not, surely, of the Gospels themselves, and parodied them here?

The picture of Rabbi Meir inscribed on the gates of Rome is reminiscent of the Eise hemo of the Gospels as well. Without pushing the point too far, I think it is not by any means out of the question that our little sequence is a parodic appropriation of the Gospel account. In general, of course, we would take such a text as a moment in a bitter polemic—a description that cannot be discounted—but the work of Galit Hasan-Rokem suggests a different direction to go in, one that sees a lighter, dialogical (which is not say necessarily ironic) interplay of intertexts, allusions, parodies and other forms so typical of the period of the Babylonian Talmud. A text such as this, however, is located in several cultural, discursive, literary contexts at one and the same time, in this case according to my suggested reading, a parody of the Christian midrashic appropriation of Psalms 22, as well as other folk and elite international cultural sources.

We find a fascinatingly, tantalizingly related story in Apuleius. In the Metamorphoses 9.17-21, we find the tale of a certain slave named Myrmex. Myrmex had been commanded on pain of his life to guard the chastity of Arete, the young and beautiful wife of the public figure Barbarus, while the latter was away on business. Determined out of fear and loyalty to carry out his charge, he even held on to the hem of her robe on the way to the bathhouse. Unfortunately the clever rake Phileitherus saw her on one of those excursions and inflamed by her beauty and the obstacles in his path, became determined to “have” her. Approaching Myrmex with the offer of a significant bribe to be divided between the guard and the woman herself, he tried to get his way.


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Myrmex was at first horrified at the thought, but over time became himself so inflamed with lust for the money that he gave in and easily persuaded the young woman to comply as well to receive her significant share of the money. Naturally the husband came home unexpectedly in the middle of the fateful night but being held off by a ruse of Myrmex did not become aware of what was going on. However, the adulterer had left his slippers under the bed, and upon discovering them in the morning, the husband figured out what had happened and determined to carry out the death penalty for Myrmex, the guard.

A funny thing happened on the way to the execution. Phileisethus himself encountered Barbarus with Myrmex in tow in chains and quickly thinking and figuring out what had transpired, accused the slave of having stolen his slippers at the bathhouse the previous day. It had a happy end.

Without suggesting any form of dependence between the two stories, I would argue that there are, nevertheless, sufficient elements shared by them to relate them one to the other. In both, the protagonist is a guard appointed to protect the “owner” of the woman (in one case from unchastity, in the other, from chastity, as it were). In both cases, not only is there a bribe (a rather commonplace detail; after all, guards are there, as it were, to be bribed), but specifically a bribe to be divided in two in order to enable Die Entführung aus dem Serail. In both cases, the compromised guard ends up in danger of his life, and in both he is saved by a funny sort of stratagem or trick. I think it is not too much to conclude that the talmudic story comes out of the same cultural well from which Apuleius drew as well, and it is highly significant in my view that this lubricious tale has been adapted for the life of a Jewish saint.

In turning now from the second to the first and third of the miracles, we move from the direct encounter with Christianity to issues of sex and gender in the Hellenistic milieu inhabited by the Babylonian Rabbis as well.16 The rabbinic text is more like than unlike the water in which it swims. There are elements in the story, for instance the chastity test, that are strikingly like topics of the Hellenistic novels, for instance Achilles Tatius’s Leucippe and Clitophon. In that novel, both protagonists (male and female) can be said to have passed such tests.17 In the case of the male protagonist, it is a particularly striking parallel to our tale of Rabbi Meir’s sister-in-law, for it is a third party (his lover Leucippe)

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who becomes convinced of her intended. Clitophon’s sexual innocence upon hearing from the woman he is living with that she has not satisfaction from her “husband,” since he is constantly complaining of (feigning, as we the readers know) illness. Leucippe herself undergoes virginity tests in the novel as well.18 Indeed, in another of the Hellenistic novels, Xenophon’s Ephesian Tale, the heroine is sent to a brothel and avoids her brothel duties through feigning sickness,19 and in Tatius, the heroine avoids violation through the excuse that she is menstruating, just as in our story,20 a defense that Simon Goldhill reminds is unique in Greek literature.21 The sexual incident in Rabbi Meir’s story thus connects his legend multiply with Hellenistic novelistic literature. It does not seem to me far-fetched to read this story of Rabbi Meir’s apparent sexual activity in this novelistic context. The successfully maintained chastity in brothels of both Rabbi Meir and his sister-in-law would form a kind of doubling of this theme, analogous to the doubly maintained chastity of Leucippe and Clitophon in their tale.

Let us look more closely, however, at this “doubling,” reading for gender difference this time, not similarity.22 In the first rescue, the damsel in question has to prove, in fact, that she is a damsel in order for there to be a miracle. Otherwise, no miracle. Having passed the chastity test devised by her tricky brother-in-law, she is vouchsafed the promised miracle, but in a rather indirect manner. Rabbi Meir produces a miracle to prove to the guard that he will not be endangered if he is caught out for letting her go. And indeed, the miracle happens, twice. The first time, as just said, to convince the guard, and the second time to actually overcome one’s sex.

Rabbi Meir was given to overcome one’s sex.

Author of Miracles him rape simpliciter, the virgin would not be deemed what.

Now we can compare escape (not the version i one in which it was another man comes into a broth a virgin, here we have a lady- a pseudo (?) John. Now the girl and saves him no certainly his chastity saved at all. Rabbi Meir’s (unless we are providing a promise tohr Elijah, in the other Roman pursuers not for the girl to have the girl to have damning for Rabbi Meir).

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second time to actually save him. It is instructive, however, to compare the conditions for the miraculous intervention (both Rabbi Meir’s and that of the Author of Miracles himself, as it were) to take place. In a situation of potential rape simiplifer, the virgin must prove that she has maintained her virginity, or she would not be deemed worthy of a rescue at all.

Now we can compare it to the instance of Rabbi Meir’s own miraculous escape (not the version in which he dipped his finger in forbidden food but the one in which it was another member). Reversing the usual topos in which a holy man comes into a brothel disguised as a soldier (and thus a customer) to rescue a virgin, here we have a holy man (well, Prophet) disguised as a whore to rescue a pseudo (?) John. Now notice that for the good Rabbi the miracle that takes place and saves him does not involve any necessity that he prove his virtue, nor certainly his chastity; indeed, were he quite chaste, he would not have been saved at all. Rabbi Meir’s sexual act cannot be simply dismissed in our reading (unless we are providing pious literature for children, I suppose). He actually had sex with Elijah, in whatever guise she was appearing at the moment. Else the Roman pursuers would not have let him go. The implication is inescapable; for the girl to have given up her chastity to save her skin would have been damning; for Rabbi Meir it is permitted and even part of the miracle.

Lest one still demur and propose that sex with an apparition is not sinful, I can argue against that claim from the Talmud itself. In yet another incident, it is Rabbi Meir who is rescued from unlawful carnal knowledge through a miraculous intervention:

Rabbi Meir was given to making fun of fornicators [claiming that it was easy to overcome one’s sexual drive. One day Satan [his sexual drive, מֶנָּר הַנָּר so Rashi, correctly23] appeared to him as a woman on the other side of the river. There was no ferry. [Rabbi Meir] began crossing the river by holding on to a rope that was stretched between the banks. When he had reached halfway across the rope, he [the sexual drive] let him go saying, “If they had not declared in Heaven: Be careful of Meir and his Torah, I would make your blood worth two farthings! [You would have been a dead man.]” (TB Kiddushin 81a)

In the one narrative, it is Elijah who appears to Rabbi Meir in the appearance of a desirable woman with whom he does have sex; in the other, it is his own desire, in the shape of Satan but the appearance of another woman who appears to him and makes him nearly lose himself entirely.

There is a genuine set of puzzles here then. A virgin girl, having been raped (i.e., had she been raped) would have been disqualified for miraculous

23 There are manuscripts such as Munich 95 that don’t read the word “Satan” at all.
rescue, but the Rabbi is rescued through illicit sexual practice. On the other hand, in another story the Rabbi would have put himself in mortal danger, had he engaged (unwittingly) in another kind of apparitional illicit encounter. Finally, it is at least worth pointing out that in both cases of the Rabbi Meir's Scheinsex (appearance of sex, playing with the scholarly convention of referring to Scheinad in the novels\textsuperscript{24}), the partner is a male figure, making this a kind of drag-queen sex altogether. Rabbi Meir is saved by this queer intercourse, in one case, while in the other, he is very nearly done in by such an appearance of sex, and the Rabbi is saved from it by a miracle. Going back to the comparison with the poor virgin girl, moreover, we see that it was her effort to remain chaste that enabled the miracle that in the end would make it possible for her to marry a virgin, while in Rabbi Meir's case, his chastity was also saved but far from having protected himself from unchastity, he arrogantly had thought that he was immune to such desires. It would seem that Scheinsex (which is presumably enjoyable by the real human participant; otherwise the shine would be quite off it) is not sinful; it is only the giving in to the sexual instinct which would have caused the potential sin, from which sin Rabbi Meir is saved by (his own?) sexual desire having been warned in heaven to leave him be. But if that be the case, then, why would the girl's submitting to rape to save her life not be equally as sinless and render her worthy of a miraculous salvation? In placing these talmudic texts together, I might suggest that for the Talmud, one could claim, as Burrus does for Leucipp and Citophon "that the tyranny of divine [demonic] eros doubles the tyranny of men."\textsuperscript{25} Underlying this talmudic narrative there appears to be a "Jewish" sexual ethic that quite contradicts the words of John Chrysostom: "The Jews disdained the beauty of virginity, which is not surprising, since they heaped ignominy upon Christ himself, who was born of a virgin. The Greeks admired and revered the virgin, but only the Church of God adored her with zeal." It would seem that at least some Jews, alike in this respect to Chrysostom's Christians (and even at least some Greeks), adored the virgin girl (or condemned her "disgraced" sister) with great zeal indeed, since, as pointed out by Burrus, both the Christian Tckla and Leucipp meet threats to their virginity with defiance to the (potential) death.\textsuperscript{26} But how does this all sit together?

I don't intend to attempt to reduce these contradictions but rather, in deed, to suggest that they, the contradictions, are the very point of the Babylonian Talmud, that to which we must attend in the Talmud is its all pervasive heteroglossia, its almost Doestoevskyan character in which, "It is not only the heroes who quarrel in Doestoevsky, but separate elements in the development of the plot seem to contain the psychology of the soul of the essence." If as I organized system for bring having as its goal the ill carvings out of a living it mistake to read the Ta a monologism. As Bak his own way Dostoevsk world, a single voice, a si The unity of the poly the voice, above the acc way of reading the Tel text—Dare I say "work Jews of Babylonia are br aggada as separate languagelanguage." In other wor with the balakha of the c represent for us in dialo, rabbinic, whatever that i would be a serious mist single world, single voice well, what I am not claim balakhaic discussion is its propose are, rather, bsla (or perhaps many others)

As Arkady Kovelmar in this last story of Rabbi leads him not to take seri himself immune, but the him in the end. The stor or even jangling of langu parallel to this can be fo that a certain youth, Me

\textsuperscript{24} Morales, \textit{op. cit.}, 166-69.
\textsuperscript{25} Burrus, \textit{op. cit.}, 67.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid.}, 62.
of the plot seem to contradict one another: facts are decoded in different ways, the psychology of the characters is self-contradictory; the form is the result of the essence.” If as Bakhtin has put it, “the novelistic hybrid is an artificially organized system for bringing different languages in contact with one another, a system having as its goal the illumination of one language by means of another, the carving out of a living image of another’s language,” then it would be a serious mistake to read the Talmud monologically, to try to reduce its dialogism to a monologism. As Bakhtin himself has complained, “Everyone interprets in his own way Dostoevsky’s ultimate word, but all equally interpret it as a single world, a single voice, a single accent, and therein lies their fundamental mistake. The unity of the polyphonic novel—a unity standing above the word, above the voice, above the accent—has yet to be discovered.” The most productive way of reading the Talmud, I am suggesting, is to take it as a novel, as the text—Dare I say “work”—in which the different languages of the late-ancient Jews of Babylonia are brought into contact with each other; the halakhah and the aggada as separate languages, each one “carving out a living image of another language.” In other words, I am suggesting that far from being harmonious with the halakhah of the official rabbinic discourse in the Talmud, the aggada may represent for us in dialogical form the voices of the non-rabbinic (or not fully rabbinic, whatever that might mean)—not necessarily “the folk”—as well. It would be a serious mistake, then, to search for some “ultimate word,” some single world, single voice, single accent of the Talmud or the Rabbis. Note, as well, what I am not claiming; I am not claiming that the dialectic of the talmudic halakhic discussion is itself polyphonic or dialogical. The dialogical relations I propose are, rather, between the halakhah as one voice and the aggada as another (or perhaps many others).

As Arkady Kovelman has pointed out, the Torah plays an ambivalent role in this last story of Rabbi Meir. It is his arrogance borne of his learning that leads him to not take seriously the dangers of his own desiring self, to imagine himself immune, but then, once again, it is that very Torah-learning that saves him in the end. The story thus enacts in its own ambivalence the ambivalence, or even jangling of languages, of halakhah and aggada in the Talmud itself. A fine parallel to this can be found once more in Philostratus’s Apollonius. It seems that a certain youth, Menippus the pupil of Demetrius no less, was the lover

28 M. M. Bakhtin and Caryl Emerson, op. cit., 43.
30 Kovelman, op. cit.
of a "foreign woman." But it was in fact only delusion, an apparition. She was, in fact, "a phantom in the shape of a woman." The youth, however strong in philosophy, was quite taken in by this phantom lover, and went to visit her often, not realizing that she was a phantom. Apollonius looks at Menippus and divines the situation and through a ruse rescues the boy from the woman who was one of the vampires, the sirens, and a werewolf, too (IV, 25). We see here a similar, but certainly not identical, plot. The young man is a philosopher as Rabbi Meir is a Torah scholar, and both presumably consider themselves immune from certain kinds of seduction, but both prove seduceable and in both cases by demon-lovers appearing as beautiful women. In the end Menippus's philosophy and Meir's Torah save them. I think we are not wrong in seeing in these parallel stories a dramatization of the difference between the serious discourses of philosophy/Torah and the seductions of erotic narrative/aggada.

But we must also be on guard against an equally serious and equally seductive error, namely to consider the aggada the voice, always and everywhere, of the lenient, the forgiving, while halakha is given the role of the severe and restrictive, our story being a case in point. According to the halakha, at every level, from the text of Leviticus, through rabbinic literature, and into the halakhic jurisprudence following the Nazi genocide, the law is entirely clear: a woman raped to save her life or that of others is blameless, Esther the Queen being the very type of such a woman. It is only in the Babylonian Talmud, one in which the language of aggada is allowed to interpenetrate the language of halakha, that we can perceive the image of another language, another discourse of the Jews of the time of the Talmud, one in which a much harsher, more severe indeed sexual ethic for women is prescribed, one in which it would seem, a woman, much as Lucetia or Agnes ought rather to allow herself to be killed rather than violated, while a man might get away scot-free by sleeping with a Prophet.

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31 Philostratus and Jones, op. cit., i: 371-77.