

## Mothers, Stepmothers, and Stepmotherlands: Jacob Maarssen and the Yiddish Tradition of Translating the *Seven Sages*

**Ruth von Bernuth**, Department of Germanic & Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, United States of America, [rvb@email.unc.edu](mailto:rvb@email.unc.edu)

**Achim Schmid**, Department of German Studies, Duke University/Department of Germanic & Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, United States of America, [achim.schmid@duke.edu](mailto:achim.schmid@duke.edu)

---

This article offers a gendered and intersectional reading of *Zibn vayzn mansters fun Roym* (1676/77), Jacob ben Meir Maarssen's Yiddish edition of *The Seven Sages of Rome*. While most scholarship has focused on the story cycle's complex transmission history across languages and cultures, this study shifts the focus to representations of motherhood, stepmotherhood, and maternal authority. It argues that the Yiddish *Seven Sages* serves not only as a didactic text for early modern Jewish readers but also encodes allegorical meanings in which the condition of exile (*goles*) is mirrored in disrupted family dynamics. Drawing on the binary opposition between 'good' birth mothers and 'evil' stepmothers, the article closely analyzes the frame narrative and embedded tale 'Tentamina' to highlight how figures of maternal care, absence, and manipulation engage with broader concerns of gender, age, class, and communal displacement. In doing so, it repositions Maarssen's translation within the corpus of early modern Yiddish print culture and offers new insights into the symbolic functions of family relations in Jewish literary responses to exile and social instability.

---



## 1. Introduction

When Jacob ben Meir Maarssen, founder of a printing dynasty in Amsterdam, published the Yiddish *Zibn vayzn mansters fun Roym* (Seven wise masters of Rome) in the Jewish year 5437 (1676/77), he added several paratexts in which he problematizes the relationship between the emperor's second wife and his son, Diocletian.<sup>1</sup> The empress is most often referred to as 'shtif-muter' ('stepmother') on the title page of the booklet as well as in its rhymed prologue and epilogue. The latter offers a lengthy interpretation of the frame tale that warns readers about stepmothers, including a caution that they bring 'di klole in ire hayzer' ('the bitterest of curses into their homes'; Maarssen, 1676/77: 50<sup>a</sup>).<sup>2</sup> In introducing a binary between 'good' birth mothers and 'evil' stepmothers, Maarssen links this opposition to an allegorical interpretation that compares the relationship between stepmothers and their stepchildren to that between non-Jews and Jews: Jews are compelled to live under the authority of gentiles in the 'stepmotherland' of *goles* (exile). Maarssen's *Seven Sages* thus offers multiple avenues for interpretation and serves as a didactic work for an early modern Jewish readership.

So far, research has often concentrated on tracing how the story cycle of the *Seven Sages* was passed down and circulated in multiple languages—especially the internal tales and their broad cultural journeys—owing it to its complicated transmission history (Kunkel, 2023: 1–12). As a result, more literary-analytical questions have often been overlooked (Eming, 2022: 216). This article uses the literary representations of relations between mothers, stepmothers, and their children as an analytical lens to explore their roles in Maarssen's Yiddish edition. This work belongs to a group of late early modern translations from German and Dutch into Yiddish that has received comparatively little scholarly attention.<sup>3</sup> Moving beyond genealogies of textual transmission, we adopt an intersectional and gendered approach that considers factors such as age and social status, questions of women's agency and power, and intergenerational dialogues between mothers and children. We further examine how microlevel family relationships can function as symbols of broader social and political dynamics. In particular, questions of placement and displacement evoke the condition of *goles*, in which the disruption of familial and communal bonds mirrors the precariousness of imagined Jewish existence in exile.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Yiddish spelling of his name is *Yankev ben Meyr Marsen*, and the full title of the book reads *Das mayse bukh iz genant di zibn vayzn mansters fun Roym* (The book of stories is called the seven wise masters of Rome). For the history of Jews in Amsterdam, with references to publishing, see Berger (2013) and Kaplan (2021).

<sup>2</sup> All translations of Maarssen's work are by the authors.

<sup>3</sup> The most comprehensive article on the Yiddish *Seven Sages* is still Paucker (1961). See also his unpublished dissertation (Paucker, 1959: 104–157) and von Bernuth (2023).

Historical evidence suggests that many premodern Jewish marriages were remarriages—not only after the death of a spouse but also after a divorce, which was not permitted in Christian society—making stepmothers a familiar part of Jewish family life (Guerson and Lightfoot, 2018: 24; Kaplan and Carlebach, 2025: 176–177). Blended families were thus a common feature of Jewish society, and poor widowers with young children, in particular, often sought remarriage promptly to secure adequate childcare (Kaplan and Carlebach, 2025: 166). Nevertheless, the notion of the ‘evil stepmother’—famously popularized by the Grimms’ fairy tales in German literature in the 19th century—was also a common trope in medieval and early modern Jewish literature, such as the *Sefer Ḥasidim* (Book of the Pietists; Baumgarten, 2004: 171–172).<sup>4</sup>

Maarsen draws on these representations of women in his paratexts. Using misogynistic language, he reads the empress as a proverbial ‘evil stepmother’ and thereby offers an interpretation that deemphasizes any nuance in her characterization. In his rhymed prologue, Maarsen recounts the first encounter between the second wife and Diocletian as an attempted seduction of the son. Her death at the end of the frame tale is presented by him as a just punishment for such ‘loyze hurn’ (‘loose whores’; Maarsen, 1676/77: 1<sup>b</sup>). In Maarsen’s reading, the *Seven Sages* functions as a cautionary tale for his audience, despite the social and cultural differences between the courtly world described in the frame tale and the common Jewish readers he imagines.

Beyond the frame narrative, mother figures also appear in the embedded tales. Central to our analysis is ‘Tentamina’ (The trials), a story featuring a mother who advises her daughter, troubled by sexual frustration, to test her old husband. ‘Tentamina’ offers a complex depiction of the mother–daughter relationship, which resonates with the frame narrative. Within the *Seven Sages*, the tale is often interpreted as a warning against following women’s advice, but we explore alternative readings, especially within the constructed binary of the ‘good’ birth mothers’ vis-a-vis the ‘evil’ stepmothers’ relation to their children (Bildhauer, 2023: 152).

This article focuses on Jacob Maarsen’s 1676/77 edition, though we also compare it to other Yiddish translations of the *Seven Sages* written and printed between 1580 and 1777. Comparing these Yiddish works reveals significant textual variations, including changes in names, translations of key terms, and modifications to religious elements. After discussing the Yiddish editions to provide an overview of their transmission history, this article aims to shed new light on representations of mother figures in

---

<sup>4</sup> Research on stepmothers in literature—aside from fairy tales—is limited. For Greek and Latin, see Watson (1995). For the Middle Ages, see Rasmussen (1997). For the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century with an emphasis on Grimms’ fairy tales, see Blaha-Peilleux (2008). For the *Seven Sages*, see van Opstall (2023).

Maarszen's Yiddish version of the *Seven Sages*, highlighting maternal practices and exploring how gender and narrative form intersect in the construction of relationships between mothers and their children—with further implications for the historical situation of European Jews in the early modern period.

## 2. Yiddish Textual Transmissions

When Moshe Henoah Altschul published his didactic work *Seyfer Brantshpigl* (The Burning Mirror) in Cracow in 1596, he referred to the *Seven Sages* as a negative example, assuming that the Hebrew *Mishle Sendebar* (Tales of Sendebar) was the same as *Di zibn manster* (The seven sages) in Yiddish, and that in it 'shtet fil klughayt fun vayber di da hobn betrogn di manen' (Altschul-Yerushalmi, 1602: fol. 39<sup>b</sup>; 'contains much wisdom about women who deceived their husbands', Altschul-Yerushalmi, 2024: 104–105).<sup>5</sup> This reference is noteworthy, as it shows that among Ashkenazic Jews, the Hebrew and Yiddish traditions of the *Seven Sages* were understood as part of a shared corpus. Numerous Hebrew manuscripts of *Mishle Sendebar* had circulated since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and the text entered print in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup>

The Yiddish *Seven Sages*—with seven confirmed separate translations and possibly more between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries—remains one of the most frequently translated works of early modern Yiddish literature. In contrast to editions of the *Seven Sages* in other languages, the names of editors, commissioners, and translators are preserved in several Yiddish versions.

It is surprising that there was only one Yiddish translation based on a Hebrew text of *Mishle Sendebar* (Zfatman, 1985: 32)—now lost—while all surviving Yiddish editions are derived from the common German and Dutch translations of the *Historia septem sapientum Romae* (version H).<sup>7</sup> Two independent translations survive in manuscript form: Two independent translations survive in manuscript form: the fragment titled *Ayn hipsh bukh fun aynem kayzer der hot gehaysn Bonkianus* (Basel, University Library, AN IX 9), which preserves only four pages and Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. Hebr. 100, written between 1580 and 1600 by Binyamin bar Josef Rofe and another unknown scribe, which survives almost complete, with only a few pages missing. These manuscripts, along with the first Yiddish print—commissioned and edited by Yankev Vayl and Yankev Moykher Sforim at Konrad Waldkirch's press under the title *Zibn*

---

<sup>5</sup> The quotation is from chapter 14, titled 'How the wife takes wisdom to her husband for the good of her husband' (Altschul-Yerushalmi, 2024: 104). The translation is based on the 1602 edition, though the same wording appears already in the first edition from 1596. The first to note this reference was Maks Erik (1926: 213).

<sup>6</sup> There are over thirty manuscripts of *Mishle Sendebar* written between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, along with three printed editions from the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. For bibliographic information, see <https://db.seven-sages-of-rome.org>.

<sup>7</sup> The work was included in a list of Jewish books compiled for Church censors in Mantua in 1595.

vayzn maynster bikhl (The seven wise masters' booklet) in Basel in 1601/02—draw on German editions that, beginning with Jacob Cammerlander's Strasbourg print of 1536, included a brief addition about Diocletianus's later life as a persecutor of Christians and his violent death. Each Yiddish version that retained this ending adopted a different strategy for addressing the Christian persecutions. While Binyamin bar Josef Rofe in Cod. Hebr. 100 preserved the reference to Christians, the 1601/02 Basel print eliminated this detail, mentioning only Diocletianus's death by poison. This difference illustrates the range of translation strategies adopted across the Yiddish editions, particularly in their treatment of references to Christians and of Christian rituals and practices.

Jacob Maarsssen's 1676/77 Amsterdam print edition was the first Yiddish translation based on a Dutch print. It is unclear whether this was a new translation or one derived from an earlier edition—now lost—that, according to the bibliographer Shabetai Bass (1680: 22), was printed in Amsterdam in 1663. Maarsssen's edition includes a table of contents, as well as a rhymed prologue and epilogue; in the former, he refers to himself as the 'shrayber' ('writer'; Maarsssen, 1676/77: 1<sup>b</sup>). His translation, for the most part, follows the Dutch, which in turn adheres closely to its Latin source. Maarsssen preserves the Dutch names of the third and fourth masters, Craton and Malquedrac, which appear in Yiddish as Krakon (misreading the *t* as a *k*) and Malkedray.<sup>8</sup> There are a few Dutch influences that inform grammar and wording such as 'kamenir' ('lady in waiting'; Maarsssen, 1676/77: 36<sup>b</sup>). Throughout the work, Maarsssen avoids using Christian terms, following a translation practice common in many early modern Yiddish books adapted from non-Jewish sources (von Bernuth, 2016: 95–96). For instance, the meetings between mother and daughter in 'Tentamina' do not occur on the way to church, but en route to a 'lust-hoyf' ('pleasure garden'), and a festive meal takes place not on a Sunday, but on a 'fayer-tag' ('holiday'; Maarsssen, 1676/77, 17<sup>b</sup> and 19<sup>b</sup>).<sup>9</sup> The 1676/77 print edition is the only extant edition of Maarsssen's translation, though he is often—incorrectly—identified as the author of subsequent Yiddish editions of the *Seven Sages*.

The next group of translations—the first extant print of the *Zibn vayzn maynster* published in Berlin 1706/07, reprinted with an almost identical page layout by Seligman Reis in Offenbach in 1713/14, and again with minor changes at the same place

---

<sup>8</sup> The names in German editions are Cato and Waldach. Dutch printing of the *Seven Sages* started as early as 1479, with an edition by Gheraert Leeu in Gouda: *Die historie van die seuen wijse mannen van Rome* ('The history of the seven wise men of Rome'; Schlusemann, 2023b: 92). Leeu's print is an almost word-for-word translation of the Latin *Historia septem sapientum*, printed in Cologne in around 1472 (Schlusemann, 2023a: 124 and 133).

<sup>9</sup> The term is derived from the Dutch 'lusthof' (pleasure garden). For more examples, see Paucker (1959: 124–142). His comparisons, however, rely solely on a German edition printed by Gülfferich in Frankfurt in 1554, which differs from the Dutch version. In the German text, for example, Diocletian is raised by the seven sages in 'ein garthen bei S. Martin' ('a garden near St Martin')—a religious setting absent in the Latin 'viridarium' and the Dutch 'prieel', rendered in Yiddish as 'lust-hoyf' (Maarsssen, 1676/77: 3<sup>a</sup>).

by Tsvi Hirsh Shpits in 1776/77—is the most puzzling in terms of its printing history. Although all three editions share verbatim passages with Maarssen’s Amsterdam print from 1677, they also contain a greater number of Hebraisms and numerous passages found in contemporary German editions of the *Seven Sages* from around 1700, which had been revised in the elaborate Baroque style.<sup>10</sup> For example, the sages are no longer said to come from Rome, but from Athens—rendered in the Yiddish prints as *At*, *As*, or *Aden*. Another notable difference is that the names of the sages appear to be taken from a German rather than a Dutch edition, accompanied by a shift in setting: instead of a simple ‘kamer’ (‘room’) for the prince, as found in both Dutch and early (pre-1700) German editions, the sages build a ‘shlos’ (‘castle’), as in the revised German prints. This suggests that an older Yiddish edition—either the lost 1663 version or Maarssen’s 1676/77 print—was revised using a German edition from around 1700, a unique process of adaptation in Yiddish storytelling. Moreover, it is unclear whether there were additional editions—such as the now-lost 1724 print: the fact that the Shpits edition, the latest surviving example in this group of translations, is the only one to include the revised ending found in the German versions from around 1700, suggests that it is not merely a reprint of the earlier editions. In this version it is not the Christians who are persecuted, but rather the pious:

Bald darnakh shtarb der keser un’ regirt zayn Diokletsyanus nakh im [...] Zunst var er ayn groyzamer tiran velkher mit Maks milyano di frumen oyf das aler shreklikhste far-folgt. Er vard aber bald daroyf mit gift hingerikht azo geyen di beze tiranen mit er-shrekn tsu grunde un’ nemen ayn erbermlikhes ende (Shpits, 1776/1777: 30<sup>b</sup>).

Soon after, the emperor died, and Diocletian ruled in his place. [...] Otherwise, he was a cruel tyrant who, along with Maximilian, persecuted the pious in the most horrific way. But he was soon poisoned and executed—thus do evil tyrants meet a dreadful end and come to a pitiful death.

Only a year earlier, in the Jewish year 5536 (1775/76), Sender ben Elye Masel published a new translation, which appeared in two editions in the same year at the press of Abraham ben Shlomo Proops, a member of another renowned printing dynasty in Amsterdam. On the title page, he refers to a previous Yiddish edition of the *Seven Sages*

---

<sup>10</sup> There are two German editions with a similar title: *Die nützliche Unterweisung der sieben Weisen Meister* (c. 1700) (VD17 23:712784E) and *Die nützliche Unterweisungen Der Sieben Weisen Meister* (c. 1700) (VD17 28:742540X). The copy of *Die nützliche Unterweisung* (VD17 23:712784E), held at the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel, has a torn title page on which the year 1680 was added by hand.

printed in ‘Taytsh-land’ (‘German lands’), which he described as ‘zar shlekht’ (‘very bad’)—presumably one of the editions from Berlin or Offenbach. As a result, he chose to base his translation on a Dutch version, rendering it into Yiddish—or, as he put it, into ‘ayn gemaklikhe shprakh’ (‘a convenient language’). He indeed used a Dutch print for both of his editions. Though they contain no woodcuts, like all other Yiddish translations of the *Seven Sages*, they do include the captions for illustrations—printed in Hebrew square letters—that appear in some Dutch editions.<sup>11</sup> While several copies of one edition have survived, only a single, incomplete, and heavily damaged copy of the other remains. This rare version, held at the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York (PJ5129.A2 S4 A9 1776a), not only features a different title page but also includes additional stories.

In addition to the lost editions from before 1595, Amsterdam 1663, and a possible 1724 printing (Wolf, 1733: 1045), there is a separate edition comprising only the prince’s tale, ‘Vaticinium’ (The prophecy), presumably produced at Menahem Nahum Meisel’s press in Cracow between 1630 and 1670 (von Bernuth, 2023: 133). It represents a distinct version of the *Seven Sages* in Yiddish, likely based on an otherwise unknown translation. Finally, two internal tales—‘Senescalculus’ (The seneschal) and ‘Amatores’ (The lovers)—were revised and merged with another story to form the tale *Mayse man un vayb* (Story of husband and wife; Zfatman, 1985: 223–231).

Not yet explored are two Hebrew manuscripts that, according to the renowned 19<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish scholar and bibliographer Moritz Steinschneider, are translations from the German *Seven Sages*: one by Eliezer, grandson of the renowned rabbi Moses Isserles, dating to the late 16<sup>th</sup> century; and another by Shimshon Friedburg in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (Steinschneider, 1893: 893, nos. 4 and 6).

This brief overview illustrates that Yiddish and Hebrew versions of the *Seven Sages* were known throughout the Ashkenazi medieval and early modern world beginning in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. While they circulated mainly in Hebrew manuscript form, their Yiddish versions appeared primarily in print, produced in major centers of Jewish printing such as Amsterdam as well as Basel, Cracow and Offenbach from the 17<sup>th</sup>- to the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century. The Yiddish editions reflect both the earlier German and the continuing Dutch interest in the narrative tradition (Schlusmann, 2023b), with each version exhibiting unique features, as will be illustrated by Maarssen’s edition.

---

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, *Een schoone ende genoegelyke Historie van de Seven Wijsen Van Romem (...)*. Amsterdam: heirs widow Gysbert de Groot, 1725.

### 3. Maternal Practices and Their Subversion in the Frame Narrative

Recent debates in scholarship on the *Seven Sages* have discussed the question of the narrator's reliability. In her reading of Johannes de Alta Silva's *Dolopathos*, Bettina Bildhauer suggests that the narrator's extreme misogynistic bias could distort not only the interpretation but also the factual representation of events, especially in scenes such as the stepmother's encounter with the mute prince. According to Bildhauer, this account reads more 'like a male sexual fantasy of humiliating a stunning and powerful woman who is desired by all men' (Bildhauer, 2020: 6). Bildhauer continues her discussion by turning to other figures in the text, such as the empress and the seven sages, demonstrating how their conflicting narratives further complicate 'the distinction between reliable and unreliable interpretation' and reinforce the work's poetics of wisdom through plurality and skepticism (Bildhauer, 2023: 152).

Regarding the narrator, Emilie van Opstall cautions against labeling the narrator as unreliable in a fictional world that does not claim to reconstruct historical truth (van Opstall, 2023: 310). Van Opstall argues for the need to distinguish between the narrator's overt bias and unreliability and implied author's intention, emphasizing the lack of irony and narrative distance. This distinction holds true for Maarssen's Yiddish *Seven Sages* as well. Especially the rhymed epilogue does not criticize or challenge the narrator's authority; on the contrary, it utilizes the anti-stepmother bias in relation to Diocletian as part of the narrative's didactic purpose for its intended Jewish audience. Furthermore, the Dutch and the Yiddish versions' plot includes details that confirm the narrative's consistency: the birth mother anticipates conflict with the second wife and arranges for her son's safety; the sages and Diocletian foresee danger in the stars; and the stepmother's scheming begins well before her false accusation.

Closely following the Dutch work, the narrator of the frame narrative of Maarssen's Yiddish *Seven Sages* contrasts two maternal relationships and assigns them to Diocletian's birth mother and his stepmother. While the former speaks little, her maternal practice is decisive—she ensures her son's moral and intellectual upbringing by removing him from courtly life. While being away from parents from a certain age on was a common historic practice in premodern education, Diocletian's mother also expresses concerns that a future stepmother could harm his development (Orme, 2003: 68):

ven ir nakh mayn tot ayn andre froy nemt vi ez gehort azo bit ikh das zi keyn makht  
zol hobn iber mayn zon un' das er vayt von ir oyf-getsogn virt um kunstn und  
vayzhayt tsu lernen (Maarssen, 1676/77: 2<sup>a</sup>).

If you take another wife after my death, as is proper, I ask that she should have no power over my son and that he be raised far from her to learn arts and wisdom.<sup>12</sup>

According to Bea Lundt, the first wife foresees that a second wife (and potential children) could cause disadvantages for her son (Lundt, 2002: 346). Rita Schlusemann summarizes this as expressing distrust in the husband's ability to choose a worthy second wife, and maintains that, from a political-strategical perspective, sending away her son and making sure that he is well educated, also guarantees that her son will be a good ruler—independently of his father's second wife (Schlusemann, 2023a: 125).

In stark contrast, the stepmother enacts a destructive maternal role. Although her marriage is framed around dynastic necessity, after remarrying, the emperor and his new wife are unable to conceive a child of their own, which may contribute to the stepmother's growing resentment toward her stepson. Her plea to summon the young prince back to court—ostensibly for consolation—quickly reveals her true intent: while some versions suggest genuine concern, others portray her as plotting his death from the moment she learns of his existence.<sup>13</sup> Maarssen's Yiddish edition, closely following the Dutch text, underscores her jealousy and premeditated hostility, reflecting anxieties about female influence, inheritance, and succession:

da di keyserin zakh das zi keyn kinder bekam azo var zi gar troyerig un' da zi hert das der keyser nokh ayn zon hat bay di zibn vayzn maynsters im tsu lernen azo dokht zi von di zelbige shtunt an vi zi im mekht tetn (Maarssen, 1676/77: 4<sup>a</sup>).

When the empress realized that she had no children, she was very sad, and when she heard that the emperor still had a son with the seven sages to teach him, she thought from that very hour how she could kill him.

Notably, we learn of the childless stepmother's intentions directly through the narrator's report of her thoughts, which gives the readers privileged insight into her concealed intentions. Her pretended maternal request to bring Diocletian home thus

---

<sup>12</sup> Diocletian's educational setting—living apart from the urban center of Rome with the seven male sages and receiving instruction in various disciplines—has frequently been described as 'monastic' in nature (Foehr-Janssens, 1994; Lundt, 2002: 135). This framing emphasizes both the ascetic and all-male character of his upbringing, suggesting a pedagogical space removed from courtly and familial entanglements.

<sup>13</sup> In the Latin *Historia septem sapientum*, the stepmother claims to desire the prince's return 'ut de eius presencia possim gaudere' ('so that his presence could bring her joy'; Roth, 2004: 240)—at least until she has children on her own. The Dutch version—similar to the German—emphasizes her jealousy and the immediate danger it poses for Diocletian: 'Soe dachte si van die ure voert hoe si hem mochte doden' ('From that hour on she thought about how she might kill him'; *Die historie van die seuen wijse mannen van Rome*, 1479: fol. a<sup>6</sup>), clearly highlighting her intent to eliminate her stepson from the moment she learns of his existence with the seven sages.

masks a violent rejection of the maternal role toward her stepson, while protecting her future offspring. The representation of her as an ‘evil’ stepmother suggests that her jealousy and hostility stem from a precarious social position, fear of losing influence or material security—especially in matters of inheritance—and anxieties about male privilege. Her actions can also be read as politically motivated, as the death of the emperor would leave her vulnerable in a system that offers her little protection without her husband’s authority (Lundt, 1993: 202; van Opstall, 2023: 302; Eming, 2022: 224–225).

The stepmother conflates maternal practices with seduction. She assumes the role of a lover, strategically deploying her beauty to entrap him. She alternates between addressing him as ‘mayn liber Diokletianz’ (‘my dear Diocletian’) and ‘mayn liber zun’ (‘my dear son’), collapsing the roles of mother and lover (Maarssen, 1676/77: 5<sup>a-b</sup>). What begins with admiration of his beauty quickly escalates to explicit sexual advances when she emphasizes her purportedly preserved virginity: ‘das ikh dir zsu kenen geb das ikh mayn eren far dikh geshport hob lazn mir nun tsusamen shlofn gen’ (‘that I let you know that I have saved my honour for you, let us now go sleep together’; Maarssen, 1676/77: 5<sup>a</sup>). Her approach warps the maternal relationship into one of transgression, culminating in her full exposure and attempted seduction:

azo ging zi hin und tet zikh vornen gants nakent oyf un’ zaght zikh vas shene layb hob ikh berayt tsu dayn viln aber der yung vol ir nit tsu redn (Maarssen, 1676/77: 5<sup>b</sup>).

So she went and showed herself completely naked from the front and says: ‘look what a beautiful body I have, ready for your will’, but the boy didn’t want to talk to her.

Diocletian’s refusal, despite her escalating provocations, signals his insistence on a maternal bond; he continues to address her as ‘libe muter’ (‘dear mother’) in his letter, implicitly demanding the maternal bond, care and restraint that she has abandoned. Unwilling to touch the ‘boym-gartn’ (‘garden of trees’)—a term whose meanings span from a literal kitchen garden or courtly retreat to the biblical paradise and, metaphorically, the act of adultery<sup>14</sup>—Diocletian invokes the ideal that a wife and mother should nurture and preserve the family, thereby underscoring his refusal to violate the integrity of his father’s marriage (Maarssen, 1676/77: 5<sup>b</sup>).

Her failed seduction triggers a drastic shift in tactics: she fabricates an accusation of rape. This reversal is deeply ironic, as she falsely claims that Diocletian violently committed the very acts she had willingly proposed. The duplicity of the stepmother is evident in her ability to manipulate perceptions, crafting a narrative that portrays

---

<sup>14</sup> On the garden of trees in medieval German literatures, see: Specht (2023).

her as the victim and the prince as the aggressor. The audience, however, possesses superior knowledge, being privy—through the narrator—to her intentions, which creates dramatic tension and reinforces her role as a deceitful antagonist.

Ultimately, the Maarssen's *Seven Sages* presents a stark dichotomy of maternal practices: the birth mother as a distant yet safeguarding figure, and the stepmother as a destructive force in relation to Diocletian. Both women's actions shape his fate, but where one nurtures from afar, the other seeks to dominate and destroy, highlighting concerns around 'evil' stepmothers as a threat to the rightful heir, power, and female agency within patriarchal structures. However, her villainy is not merely rooted in personal malice but in a strategic effort to preserve her status. The Yiddish text not only emphasizes the stepmother's awareness of her precarious position from the outset but also reveals her duplicity early on—though she claims to long for the boy's company, she begins plotting his death as soon as she learns about his existence, which reflects deeper concerns, corroborated in Maarssen's paratexts, about female influence, sexuality, and succession within a patriarchal system. This stands in juxtaposition to the cautious first wife, who—out of care for her son's wellbeing and education—arranges for him to be raised by the seven sages, away from courtly intrigues.

#### 4. Milk and Blood: Maternal Bonds in 'Tentamina'

The embedded tale 'Tentamina' problematizes the theme of motherhood through another portrayal of a complex maternal figure: the mother of a dissatisfied young wife married to an older knight. 'Tentamina' is the tale of the fourth master and occupies a central position within the collection, appearing as the eighth of fifteen narratives in the *Seven Sages*. The young woman's continued childlessness after three years of marriage deepens her frustration with her husband's impotence, leading her to desire a lover. In a conversation with her mother, she complains that she finds no more pleasure in sharing a bed with her husband than she would with a 'zoy' ('sow') and argues that a priest would be the safest partner for an extramarital relationship.<sup>15</sup> Rather than immediately acting on her desires, the daughter consults her mother, who then instructs her to test the knight's patience in three escalating steps: cutting down his favorite tree, killing his beloved dog, and publicly humiliating him at a banquet. In response, the knight punishes his wife by hiring a barber to bleed her, leaving her so weakened that she summons her mother and willingly renounces her plans for adultery.

---

<sup>15</sup> Notably, the Yiddish 'Tentamina' refers to the husband as a sow and in the Dutch version uses 'vercken' ('pig'; *Die historie van die seuen wijse mannen van Rome*, 1479: fol. e 1')—a striking departure from the Latin and German texts, which describe him as a 'truncum' ('trunk'; Roth, 2004: 327) or 'als leg eyn stock by mir' (as though a stick lay beside me) (*Die Sieben Weisen Meyster*, 1537: fol. G iij'). While the latter metaphor suggests the old knight's lack of vitality or sexual desire, the Dutch and Yiddish terms introduce a more grotesque, animalistic element, highlighting the woman's unfulfilled desires with greater visceral force.

Bea Lundt (2002: 296) interprets ‘Tentamina’ as a cautionary tale about an extramarital lover, while Yasmina Foehr-Janssens (2020: 176–176) emphasizes the men’s confrontation with their own age and with the striking age difference between them and their young wives. Lundt (2002: 395) also highlights the theme of childlessness. As Foehr-Janssens argues in her discussion of the *Roman de sept sages de Rome*, ‘Tentamina’ ‘operates as a kind of mise en abyme of the collection as a whole and of the frame story’ (Foehr-Janssens, 2020: 176) referring to a form of literary recursiveness, where a narrative segment reflects or mirrors significant elements—such as themes, motifs, or structures—of the larger text, creating a self-referential dynamic within the work (Wolf, 2013). While in the *Seven Sages*, all embedded tales might be considered mise en abyme in this broad sense, ‘Tentamina’ stands out because it shares specific motifs with the frame narrative, particularly age-disparate marriages that generate sexual frustration and practices of mothering.<sup>16</sup> The tale repeats the basic situation of a young woman married to an old man and weaves in motifs of deception and illicit desire—for instance, the priest’s disguise echoes the empress’s lover who is disguised as a woman among her chambermaids and is described as being much more beloved by her than any of the others.

The motif of the tree operates across multiple narrative levels in the *Seven Sages*, generating a recursive symbolic structure characteristic of mise en abyme. In the frame narrative, Diocletian warns his stepmother not to intrude upon his father’s metaphorical ‘boym-gartn’ (‘garden of trees’; Maarssen, 1676/77: 5<sup>b</sup>). In the empress’s first embedded tale, ‘Arbor’ (The tree), which opens the series of exempla in many European versions, a man destroys a mature, fruitful tree in favor of a young sapling that ultimately bears no fruit—a tale urging the emperor to view himself as the elder tree and his son as an unworthy replacement. In ‘Tentamina’, the tree recurs when the young wife of the impotent knight cuts down his favorite tree, a highly symbolic act that suggests not only the severing of the marital bond but also a metaphorical castration. The recurring use of the tree as a metaphor for generational succession, conjugal relations, and sexual potency across narrative layers invites reflections on symbolic economy and interpretive mirroring. As Andreas Bässler describes through his concept of ‘metaphorische Inversion’ (‘metaphoric inversion’), such tropes operate by staging a literalized visual or dramatic action—such as the cutting of a tree—that invites the reader to reconvert it into its metaphorical significance, thereby reinforcing the moral or satirical undercurrent of a ‘world turned upside down’ (Bässler, 2003: 18).

---

<sup>16</sup> As exempla deployed by the stepmother and the sages, the embedded tales’ primary function is to comment on the frame narrative and to persuade the emperor, often by mirroring motifs or concerns from the main plot—such as betrayal, hidden desires, and cunning persuasion (e.g., the stepmother’s attempts to expose the sages).

Alongside this vegetal motif, other symbols also resonate across the tales: the motif of the dog, for instance, aligns with the empress's tale 'Canis' (The dog), while the act of bloodletting performed on the young woman in 'Tentamina' eerily anticipates the empress's eventual execution.

However, while these parallels support reading 'Tentamina' as a *mise en abyme*, significant differences make it problematic to equate the tale too closely with the frame story; although research often draws direct comparison between the empress and the knight's young wife, our focus shifts to the maternal practices of Diocletian's mother, the role of the empress as a stepmother, and the mother in 'Tentamina', which reveal a more complex network of care, power, and intervention. This contrast is further deepened by spatial dynamics: in 'Tentamina', the mother, though excluded from the private sphere of the household, is able to interact with her daughter in semi-public spaces like a church in Dutch and a pleasure garden in Yiddish, offering moral guidance. Furthermore, like the birth mother in 'Tentamina', the sages—engaged by Diocletian's deceased mother—are those who provide the crucial advice that ensures her son's survival. Thus, while 'Tentamina' functions as a *mise en abyme* through its thematic echoes and its structural role within the collection of embedded tales, its maternal dynamics complicate a simple mirroring, offering a counter-narrative that highlights maternal care and female agency within a patriarchal framework.

During the first test, when the daughter cuts down the tree and builds a fire, she explains that she wanted to warm him when he came home cold. A cold constitution was often associated not only with age but also with infertility.<sup>17</sup> In the second test, the daughter kills the dog just before bedtime, after it soils their silk bed linen with its dirty feet—a scene that reflects her frustration over unfulfilled sexuality. While she refers to her husband as a sow in her first encounter with her mother, the dog's animalistic behavior further alludes to the couple's marital problems—specifically, her husband's impotence and his neglect of her sexual desires. When the daughter points out the dog's problematic behavior to her husband, he merely replies that he cares more about the dog than the sheets. When he is publicly shamed during the banquet as the third test of his wife, the husband decides to act and acknowledges the excess of foul blood in his young wife's body. Following the humoral theory of bodily fluids, he summons a barber to supposedly restore balance. However, the bloodletting scene—marked by the young wife's pleas for mercy and her husband's insistence on letting the blood flow until all colour drains from her face—reveals the act as violent and cruel. Believing that she

---

<sup>17</sup> For the symbol of the tree see Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1994: 1026–1033. On coldness and infertility, see Toepfer, 2022: 62.

is close to her death, the daughter calls for her mother. The latter is happy when she hears this: ‘Da di muter di botshaft bekam var zi fro’ (‘Upon receiving the message, the mother felt a sense of joy’; Maarssen, 1676/77: 20<sup>b</sup>).

Despite the cruel outcome, ‘Tentamina’ offers a narrative in which a mother uses maternal practices and parental strategies for her adult daughter. Though Maarssen closely follows the Dutch source, the care of mothers for adult children features also elsewhere in premodern Jewish literature (Baumgarten, 2017). In each of her three encounters between mother and daughter, the tale intensifies the emphasis on familial and embodied bonds: the mother first invokes her own fidelity within her happy marriage, contrasting her restraint with her daughter’s desires; next, she appeals to ‘kindlikhe libshaft’ (‘maternal affection’) and ‘zegnungen daynes foters’ (‘paternal blessings’); and finally, she reminds her daughter of her breast milk she once gave her and the pain endured in childbirth. These appeals delay the daughter’s desires and indirectly alert her husband, who—after the third transgression—responds by ordering a barber to perform bloodletting; notably, however, the underlying issue of the couple’s sexual frustration and childlessness remain unaddressed, leaving a central tension in their marriage unresolved.<sup>18</sup> Previous scholarship based on the *Roman des sept sages* and Hans von Bühl’s German rhymed version interprets the mother’s actions as motivated by revenge or by loyalty to the old husband (Foehr-Janssens, 2020; Lundt, 1997; Reynders, 2020: 224). However, Maarssen’s Yiddish version does not indicate this kind of emotion. Instead, we would like to offer a different reading: assuming that extramarital affairs were highly dangerous for young women and could easily result in a death sentence, the mother’s repeated interventions may be understood as attempts to protect her daughter’s life and the family’s honour, extending her maternal practice beyond the individual child to the well-being of the family as a whole (Burghartz, 1991). If the mother accepts phlebotomy as a legitimate medical treatment—despite its violent nature—to quell sexual desire and uphold the patriarchal family structure, then she arguably succeeds in safeguarding both her daughter and the honour of her family. This interpretation is reinforced by ‘Tentamina’s’ conclusion, in which the mother checks whether the daughter still desires the priest. In Maarssen’s Yiddish version, the daughter curses him—‘der tayvl mag in bashaysn’ (‘the devil can shit on him’)—and declares her exclusive love for her husband (Maarssen, 1676/77: 21<sup>a</sup>).<sup>19</sup> The taming of the young wife thus restores patriarchal order, preserves the honour

---

<sup>18</sup> Bloodletting, or phlebotomy, was a common medieval practice and was often performed in monasteries to suppress sexual desire (Kalas, 2024).

<sup>19</sup> The Dutch is less explicit and uses the verb ‘beschamen’ (‘shame’; *Die historie van die seuen wijse mannen van Rome*, 1479: e 7’).

of both her natal and marital families, and serves as a counter-narrative to the frame story, where the empress unapologetically pursues her own affair. This message likely contributed to the tale's appeal as a didactic work, as evidenced by its inclusion in other collections, such as Cammerlander's 1538 Protestant edition of *Ritter vom Thurn* (Burghartz, 1991).

The ending of 'Tentamina' in Maarssen's Yiddish edition follows closely the Dutch transmission of the *Seven Sages*. However, more than a hundred years later, Sender Masel published a new Yiddish translation of the *Seven Sages* in Amsterdam. Here, 'Tentamina' concludes differently: instead of fully submitting to the pressure exerted by her husband, the young wife preserves a measure of independence and declares that, from now on, she will love only herself (Proops, 1775/76: 20<sup>b</sup>).

### 5. Reading the *Seven Sages* with the Yiddish Epilogue

In his 1677 work, Jakob ben Meir Maarssen concludes the *Seven Sages* with a rhymed epilogue reflecting on the role of mothers—especially stepmothers—in Jewish families (see appendix 1). Written in a Yiddish rich with Hebraisms and references to Jewish religious practices, the text contains misogynistic generalisations about women's unfaithfulness, encapsulated in lines such as 'ayn bez vayb lezt nit ir zit' ('an evil woman does not change her ways'; Maarssen, 1676/77: 50<sup>a</sup>). Maarssen thus offers a reading of the *Seven Sages* in which the empress embodies all the vices traditionally attributed to women, particularly those who enter existing families as new mothers. Maarssen constructs a binary between birth mothers and stepmothers and portrays the relationship between stepmothers and stepchildren as inherently problematic.

Yet the poem offers a form of 'tikve' ('hope'): either the woman goes to the 'mikve' ('mikvah')—a ritual bath traditionally mandated for women following menstruation as part of the laws of family purity—reimagined here as a means of washing away her 'royges' ('anger'), or the man disciplines her physically with 'moyl-tashn' ('slaps in the face'), which she is told she must accept as something good (Maarssen, 1676/77: 50<sup>a</sup>). The latter aligns with other modes of corporeal correction found in some tales like 'Tentamina'. However, the author complains that corporeal punishment is ineffective with stepmothers. He warns that men take another woman blindly, failing to recognize the many problems a new wife may bring—mistreating not only her stepchildren but also her husband. These claims are supported by a reference to Moses's curse for communal disobedience of the law: 'das iz ayn klole fun Moyshe dayn zin un' dayn tekhter varn iber entfert aynem folk aynem andern' ('this is Moses's curse: that your sons and daughters were given to another people'), quoting Deuteronomy 28:32 in a slightly altered version (Maarssen, 1676/77: 50<sup>a</sup>).

In a midrashic reading of the same verse, the Talmud explains that ‘am aḥer’ (‘a different nation or people’) refers not to living in exile, but to ‘the father’s wife, the stepmother’ (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 56a; Yevamot 63b). In this interpretation, the curse is not only about foreign domination over the younger generation but also reflects domestic disorder. The stepmother is cast as belonging to an ‘am aḥer’ within the intimate structure of the home—someone who disrupts family unity and usurps the role of the birth mother. She becomes a figure of both alienation and moral decline, reinforcing anxieties about maternal roles that a stepmother is presumed incapable of fulfilling.

There is, however, another, more implicit way of reading Maarssen’s stereotypical depiction of the strained relationship between stepmothers and stepchildren—one that emerges when we return to the original biblical context of Moses’s curse, in which future generations of Israelites are condemned to live among another nation, a condition associated with *gole*s (exile). This interpretation is reinforced by a subtle shift in verbal meaning. Deuteronomy 28:32—‘Your sons and daughters shall be given unto another people’—uses a passive participle that carries a future-oriented sense, but Maarssen quotes it in the past tense, thereby aligning it with the contemporary condition of the Jewish people—commonly also referred to as ‘children of Israel’ (Exod. 1:1)—living in the diaspora. That this applies to a broader Jewish community is also seen by the fact that he names both ‘ashkenaz’ and ‘polak’ (‘Western and Eastern European Jews’; Maarssen, 1676/77: 50<sup>a</sup>) referring to the two Yiddish-speaking groups in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Amsterdam (Kaplan, 2021).

Extending this reading to Maarssen’s epilogue reveals a stark differentiation between the ‘rekhte muter’ (‘real mother’)—in this case, Jewish mothers—who can restore order by going to the *mikve* and adhering to Jewish law, and stepmothers, implicitly Gentiles, who cannot. Maarssen thus sets the antagonistic relationship between Diocletian and the empress in parallel to the situation of Jews living among ‘another people,’ who treat them as stepchildren: unwanted and subject to arbitrary discipline. This comparison, however, focuses exclusively on the relationship between (step)mothers and children and overlooks other aspects of the *Seven Sages* frame tale—for instance, that the prince ultimately returns home, whereas the empress herself remains away from home and without real protection.

Maarssen is not the only one to offer an allegorical reading of the *Seven Sages*. Sebastian Wild’s play, for instance, presents an interpretation in which the emperor represents a Christian who should offer his soul (the son) to the holy ghost (Kunkel, 2023: 45–46). If read as an allegory, Maarssen’s epilogue assumes a distinctly political dimension. This is further reinforced by Maarssen in the closing verses of

the epilogue, where he likens the proverbial hostility of a stepmother toward her stepchild to Haman, the king's minister from the Book of Esther, who attempts to kill all the Jews but ends up on the gallows himself. Framing Jewish life as taking place in a 'stepmotherland'—under the constant threat of a stepmother who acts like Haman, the proverbial enemy of the Jewish people—offers an allegorical reading of the Yiddish *Seven Sages* that could explain the continued success of the book among Yiddish readers in the early modern period.<sup>20</sup> The description of living in a stepmotherland and its implications for Jewish identity, vulnerability, and continuity in exile are significant, even if not fully articulated in the text—likely out of fear of being accused of anti-Christian sentiment. In this light, Maarssen's Yiddish version of *The Seven Sages* can be read as a guide for navigating life—and claiming agency—as a religious and political minority community.

## 6. Conclusion

Moving beyond traditional genealogies of textual transmission, our analysis has focused on the figures of mothers and stepmothers, and the practices of mothering, as a lens through which we explore Maarssen's *Zibn vayzn mansters fun Roym*. The topic of (step)mothers emerges as particularly salient given that the title page, the brief summary that serves as a preface, and Maarssen's rhymed epilogue all place the words and deeds of the stepmother at the narrative's core.

The frame narrative sets up a striking contrast between a nurturing birth mother—who safeguards her son's education and physical well-being while warning the emperor of the risks posed by a second wife—and the archetypal 'evil' stepmother. The latter, childless and sexually frustrated, not only accepts an extramarital lover but also abandons her maternal role altogether, seeking instead to seduce her stepson and orchestrate his death. Diocletian, however, resists this rupture of familial roles: he continues to address her as 'libe muter' ('dear mother') and warns her in metaphors that evoke his father's 'boym-gartn', symbolizing his commitment to preserving (step)maternal bonds even in face of betrayal.

---

<sup>20</sup> The neologism 'Stiefmutterland' ('stepmotherland') evokes a sense of alienation and emotional estrangement from one's homeland. It was used occasionally as early as the 19th century, but more significantly by Else Lasker-Schüler in her 1931 poem 'Aus der Ferne' ('From afar'), as well as by Elisabeth Schuder in her 2003 novel *Deutsches Stiefmutterland: Wege zu Berthold Auerbach*, a fictionalized account of the 19th-century German-Jewish author's life and identity struggles. In both contexts, the term underscores a homeland that fails to offer maternal care or protection—an inversion of 'Heimat' ('home' or 'homeland') as a nurturing and secure space. Albert Einstein referred to German as his 'Stiefmutterssprache' (stepmother tongue), the language he continued to use even while living in exile (Becker, 2025).

The comparison with the mother figure in 'Tentamina'—a tale that functions as a *mise en abyme* both through thematic parallels and narrative variation, such as the young wife cutting down the old knight's favorite tree—sharpens these dynamics. In this embedded tale, the birth mother acts not through confrontation but through repeated warnings and advice to her daughter, guiding her to test her husband's patience. Her maternal practice, however, extends beyond care for her daughter alone: it aims to preserve the honour of both the daughter's natal and marital families. The tension is ultimately resolved through bloodletting, which tempers the daughter's sexual desires and restores marital order.

Both narratives affirm the authority and legitimacy of birth motherhood, while casting childless stepmothers as marginal, destabilizing figures who lie outside normativematernalstructures. Yet, in the Yiddish version, Maarssen's epilogue reframes the entire collection through a distinctly Jewish inflection. While offering strategies for moral instruction and disciplining desire in family affairs, it simultaneously positions the Jewish community as a minority living among 'another people,' like children in a stepmotherland. In this reading, the maternal figures take on a broader allegorical function, reflecting not only familial dynamics but also the socio-political conditions of Jewish life in *goles*.

---

## Appendix 1: The epilogue

Transcribed from Maarsen, 1676/77: 50<sup>a</sup>–50<sup>b</sup>, our translation

	בישלוס דר זיבן וויזן מאנשטערס	Conclusion of the Seven Sages
1	איר ליבי לייט. ווען איר דש מעשה הביט אויז גילייט.	My dear public! Now that you have reached the end of the tale,
2	דען מאג זיך איקליכיר דר נוך לענקין. אונ' אן דאכט טון גידענקין:	May every one of you act accordingly.
3	אין זינים הרץ. אן זעלכי גרושי שמארץ.	Take it to heart and reflect on how much pain
4	וועגין דיא גרושי און טרויא. דיא קומן קאן פון דער אנדרי פרויא:	can come from the treachery of a second wife
5	פון דער דריטה דש גלייכן. ווען זיא לנג לעבן אונ' ניט בלד פון דיזר וועלט טון ווייכן:	or from a third. (Assuming such wives live long and do not soon depart from this world!)
6	דען איינר מיט דער ערשטי הוט גיהאט קינדה. אונ' נעמט איין שטיף מוטר צו זיא וויא איין בלינדר:	If a man has had children with his first wife and then takes another, a stepmother, as if he was blind,
7	עש זייא דיא אנדר אודר דיא דריטה. הט וול איטליכם דר ור בהיטה:	Be she a second wife or a third, may you all be protected from this.
8	ער מיינט זיא ווער גוט אונ' פֿיין: גידענקט ניט אן דיא בייין:	He thinks she is nice and pretty and does not consider the pain.
9	דען דש איז איין קללה פֿון משה דיין זין אונ' דיין טעכטער ווארן איבר ענטפֿרט איינס פאלק איינס אנדערן. זאגן אונזרי חכמים דיא קללה גיט אויף קינדר דיא דא קריגן איין שטיף מוטר נוך דעם דש איר רעכטי מוטר טוט פון דיזם עולם וואנדרן:	This is the meaning of Moses's curse: 'Your sons and daughters were given to another people.' Our Sages explain that this curse falls on children when their real mother dies and they are given a stepmother.
10	אונ' דש איז גמיין אונטר דעם פֿאלק עש זייא אשכנז אדר פאלק: דש זיא צו אירן קינדר נעמן איין שטיף מוטה. גידענקן ניט דש זיא דיא קללה אין אירה היזר קריגן דיא דא איז אין גאר ביטר:	This is so common among Western and Eastern European Jews alike. They take a stepmother for their children without thinking they may be inviting the bitterest of curses into their home.
11	וויא וואול דש אין דש גמיין. טרעפט עז דיא קינדר ניט אליין:	As common as this is, it is not only the children who may be affected.
12	דען צו צייטן. פינט מאן אן אונטר דען לייטן:	For sometimes one finds that
13	דאש איינר הנט צרות אן זינים לייב. פון זינים ערשטן ווייב:	one has brought trouble on oneself, even with one's first wife

(Contd.)

	בישלוס דר זיבן וויזן מאנשטערס	Conclusion of the Seven Sages
14	ער העט קינדר אודר ניט. איין ביז ווייב לחוט ניט איר זיט:	and whether one has children or not. An evil woman does not change her ways.
15	דוך איז דר צו איין תקוה. ענטוואר זיא גיט אין דש מקוה:	But there is one hope: that she goes to the mikveh
16	דען מיט וושר קאן זיא אירן רוגז אב וועשן. אדר דער מן גיבט איר מויל טעשן:	and it washes away her rage. Failing that, the husband just has to slap her face.
17	אזו מוז זיא דש נעמן ור גוט. ווען זיא ווש ביז טוט:	If she behaves badly, she needs to accept it as fitting
18	אונ' ווען זיא וואקר ווארט גיקלאפט. דען איז איר מויל גשטאפט:	that she gets a good beating, if that's what it takes to make her shut up.
19	אבר דיא ווייבר דיא דער נוך קומן. דא העלפט ניקש אל שליג ער זיא דז זיא ור קרומן:	But as for subsequent wives nothing helps with them except to carry on beating them until they bend.
20	אונ' בפרט דיא אלטי קענן איר מויל ניט האלטי:	Especially the old ones – they just can't keep their mouths shut.
21	זיא עשן ניט דר ור קוכן: ווען וואו זיא נייארט פֿלֿוכן:	They ruin the food they cook, not that it's what they eat. All they do well is curse,
22	דש גלייכן מיט שווערן. העלפט אן אין קיין ווערין:	and it's the same with their swearing – you simply can't stop it.
23	זיא טון דען עולם בלענדן. ווען זיא מן אונ' קינד נייארט שענדן:	They mock everyone, cursing both husband and child,
24	אונ' אך אל איר קרובים טון ור שמעהן. אז מן מענך מאלט האט גיהערט אונ' גיזעהן:	and the relatives too. One hears it and sees it only too often.
25	צו צענקין איז איר גר גאך. אז וויא דש שפריכט ווארט גיט דש בעשט קומט זעלטן הינטן נאך	They are quick to quarrel and, as the saying goes, 'seldom comes a better.'
26	זיא ווערן זיך מיט אירם מונט: גלייך מן זאגט עש איז ביז בענדי[ן] צו מכין איין אלטר הונט:	She'll just answer back. As one says, 'You can't teach an old dog new tricks.'
27	דען אינש גמיין דער קינדר הא[ט] דר נעמט איין פֿרויא דיא דא איז אלט.	When a man who has children takes an old wife,
28	אונ' זיא טונג דיא שטיף קינד[דר] גרוש גוואלט: ווייל ער זיין קינדר בייא שטין זוא וויל זיא פֿון אים [גיין]	and she inflicts great cruelty on the children, if he stands up for them, she is happy to leave him.
29	טוט ער זיא שלאגן. טוט זיא אל דש ביז אויף אים זאגן:	And if he beats her, she'll badmouth him.

(Contd.)

	בישלוס דר זיבן וויזן מאגשטרס	Conclusion of the Seven Sages
30	עש איז [איין] ביזי איא. זיא טוט אינן מיט אנדר גר וויא:	This is a bad situation; she'll hurt the whole family.
31	דעם מן העלפט [קיין] רופא. אונ' צו דען קינדר איז קיין תרופה:	No doctor can help the husband and there is no remedy for the children.
32	ווש זול איך דר פון שר[ייבן] לנג. זיא איז גלייך דיא ביזי שלנג:	Why should I go on about this at length? She is just like the evil serpent.
33	איך בין צו שרייבן מירי[!] ווש זיך [דר] מן אלז גיניד:	I am weary of writing of all that one is forced to endure.
34	הש. י זול איטליכם בהיטן ור דיזם פלוך. דען עז [ווס] קיינר ווען דא דרוקט דער שוך:	May ha-Shem yisborekh [God] protect everyone from this curse. No one knows where the shoe pinches
35	אלש דער יעניג דער אין אן הוט. [...] חוט דער צו שנד אונ' שפוט:	except the one who wears it; [He] must endure the shame and the mockery as well.
36	קומט ער אין זיין הויז. שפילט זיא מיט אים אז דיא קאץ מיט דער מוז:	When he comes home, she plays with him as a cat with a mouse.
37	סוף דבר אלי דיא תשובת דיא מן זעצט דיא ביזה לייט. בייא דיזר תשובה זול מן זיא אלי זעצן אויף איין זייט:	In short, don't bother reasoning with bad people. With this response one can set all on one side.
38	דען דער דא הערט פון דיזר צרה. דעם גלינגן זייני אהרה:	Whoever hears about this trouble, he is able to pray,
39	דען ער קאן ניט טון איין נקמה אך האט ער פון קיינס מענשן איין נחמה:	but he cannot take revenge nor find anyone to console him.
40	ביז ער קאן ור ביטה: דז מן זיא אנויז טר[אג] אוף דר מיטה.	All he can do is wait until he can have her carried out on a bier.
41	אבר דען דש גוט ווייב. טוט אים גוטש אן זיינס [לייב]	A good wife, though, is good for him
42	אונ' ציהט דיא שטיף קינדר צו גוטס דר נעבן: ברענגט זיא [...] צו איביגן לעבן:	and for the stepchildren whom she will bring up well and set on the path to eternal life,
43	אונ' ניט אלי צייט טוט פֿעקוירן. וויא זיא מן אונ' קינדר וויל ור וירן:	not spend all her time scheming how to undermine both husband and children.
44	וויא איר אין דעם מעשה הבט ור[...] ווש דיא מלכה הוט גיטאן אירם אייניגן שטיף זון דעם שטומה.	You have heard in this tale how the queen treated her only stepson, a mute,

(Contd.)

	בישלוס דר זיבן וויזן מאנשטערס	Conclusion of the Seven Sages
45	וויא דער מלך זיין איינציגן זון אום דער מלכה הוט וועלן אום לעבן ברענגן. אונ' זיא שענטליך אן גלגן הענגן:	and how the king, because of her, wanted to have his only son killed. But it was she who ended up hanged in disgrace on the gallows.
46	דיזר זכן וויל [איך] נוא שווייגן שטיל. ביט נייארט איטלכר זול זיך נעמן איין בייא שפ[יל]	On this matter I will now be silent. All I ask is that each of you takes this story as a parable,
47	ווען דז טונן די העכשטי ווש טון דען דיא שלעכשטי:	for what the grandest people do the worst folk do too.
48	אונ' בפרט אין אכט צו נעמן. אונ' ניט צו שעמן:	Don't hesitate to take great care that
49	ווש דיא מלכה הוט גיטון אירם שטיף קינד. ווז גידענקט דען אייני [!] די קומט אונטר גרוש גיזינד:	every woman who joins an existing household remembers how the queen treated her stepchild.
50	אונ' גאט זול אין גבן גוטי דיעה. דז קייני טוט וויא די מלכה דיא טמאה	May God grant them the goodness not to behave like the vile queen
51	די איר שטיף זון הוט וועלן הענגן גלייך המן. דרוף זאג איך אמן:	who would have loved, like Haman, to see her stepson hanged. To all this I say 'Amen!'

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Michael Terry, Yaakov Herskovitz, and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback and valuable comments.

### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

---

### References

#### *Seven Sages editions and manuscripts*

*Ayn hipsh bukh fun aynem kayzer der hot gehaysn Bonkianus, fragment.* c. 1600. Basel, University Library, AN IX 9. [https://www.nli.org.il/en/manuscripts/NNL\\_ALEPH990001236660205171/NLI](https://www.nli.org.il/en/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH990001236660205171/NLI)

*Ayn vunderlikhe shene historiye mit namen di zibn vayzn maynsters fun Roym.* 1775/76. Amsterdam: Abraham ben Shlomo Proops. <https://sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/jd/content/titleinfo/1786481>

*Das mayse bukh iz genant di zibn vayzn mansters fun Roym.* 1676/77. Amsterdam: Jacob ben Meir Maarszen. <https://diglib.hab.de/drucke/xb-9322/start.htm>

*Di zibe vayze maynster.* Between 1580 and 1600. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. Hebr. 100, fol. 90<sup>a</sup>–132<sup>b</sup>. <https://mdz-nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb00036332-1>

*Die historie van die seuen wijse mannen van Rome.* 1479. Gouda: Gheraert Leeu. <http://resolver.sub.uni-goettingen.de/purl?PPN770755488>

*Die nützliche Unterweisung der sieben Weisen Meister, Wie Pontianus der König [...].* c. 1700. No place: no publisher. <https://diglib.hab.de/drucke/xb-9322/start.htm>

*Die nützliche Unterweisungen Der Sieben weisen Meister, Wie Pontianus der Zeit Keyser [...].* c. 1700. No place: no publisher. <http://purl.uni-rostock.de/rosdok/ppn1014844177>

*Die Sieben Weisen Meyster. Wie Pontianus keyser [...].* 1537. Strasbourg: Jakob Cammerlander, VD16 S 6333. [https://digital.ub.uni-koeln.de/view/retro\\_991013261119706476\\_009168](https://digital.ub.uni-koeln.de/view/retro_991013261119706476_009168)

*Een schoone ende genoegelyke Historie van de Seven Wijzen Van Romen [...].* 1725. Amsterdam: heirs widow Gysbert de Groot.

*Historia septem sapientum Rom(a)e.* Before 1472. Cologne: Printer of Pseudo-Augustine.

Roth, D (ed.) 2004 '*Historia septem sapientum*': *Überlieferung und textgeschichtliche Edition.* Vol. 1. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.

*Zibn vayzn maynster bikhl.* 1601/02. Basel: Konrad Waldkirch. <https://doi.org/10.3931/e-rara-13454>

*Zibn vayzn maynster.* 1706/07. Berlin: no publisher. [https://www.nli.org.il/en/books/NNL\\_ALEPH990021457860205171/NLI](https://www.nli.org.il/en/books/NNL_ALEPH990021457860205171/NLI)

*Zibn vayzn maynster.* 1713/14. Offenbach: Seligman Reis.

*Zibn vayzn maynster.* 1776/77. Offenbach: Tsvi Hirsh Shpits. [https://www.nli.org.il/en/books/NNL\\_ALEPH990021457900205171/NLI](https://www.nli.org.il/en/books/NNL_ALEPH990021457900205171/NLI)

**Altschul-Yerushalmi, M H** 1602 *Seyfer brant-shpigl.* Konrad Valdkirkh. <https://doi.org/10.3931/e-rara-34362>

**Altschul-Yerushalmi, M H** 2024. *Seyfer Brantshpigl.* Faienstein, M (ed. and trans.). Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111414683-083>

**Bass, S** 1680. *Sifte yeshenim.* Amsterdam: Tartas. <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/view/bsb102168>

**Bässler, A** 2003 *Sprichwortbild und Sprichwortschwank: Zum illustrativen und narrativen Potential von Metaphern in der deutschsprachigen Literatur um 1500.* Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110902259>

**Baumgarten, E** 2004 *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

**Baumgarten, E** 2017 'Mothers and Ma'asim: Maternal Roles in Medieval Hebrew Tales.' In: Lehman, M, Kanarek, J L, and Bronner, S J (eds.) *Mothers in the Jewish Cultural Imagination.* Liverpool: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization / Liverpool University Press, 345–357.

**Becker, P v** 2025 Der Schatz von Princeton: Was Albert Einstein seiner letzten Liebe erzählte. *Der Tagesspiegel*, 20 September. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/der-schatz-von-princeton-was-albert-einstein-seiner-letzten-liebe-erzahlte-14337722.html> [Last accessed 28 November 2025].

- Berger, S** 2013 *Producing Redemption in Amsterdam: Early Modern Yiddish Books in Paratextual Perspective*. Leiden: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004248069>
- Bernuth, R v** 2016 *How the Wise Men Got to Chelm: The Life and Times of a Yiddish Folk Tradition*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bernuth, R v** 2023 'A Friend in Need is a Friend Indeed? Friendship, Love, and Loyalty in the Yiddish *Seven Sages*.' In Gruenbaum, C, and Oehme, A (eds.) *Medieval and Early Modern Jewish Romance*. Amsterdam: Arc Humanities Press, 129–152.
- Bildhauer, B** 2020 'Silencing a Woman's Accusation of Attempted Rape in Johannes de Alta Silva's *Dolopathos*.' *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 64: 117–136. <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.NMS.5.127659>
- Bildhauer, B** 2023 'Every Narrator Is Biased: The Polyphonic Poetics of 'The Seven Sages of Rome' in a German Version.' *Das Mittelalter*, 28: 137–154. <https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.mial.2023.1.24772>
- Blahe-Peilleux, N** 2008 *Mütter und Anti-Mütter in den Märchen der Brüder Grimm*. Tübingen: Tübinger Vereinigung für Volkskunde e.V.
- Burghartz, S** 1991 'Ehebruch und eheherrliche Gewalt: Literarische und außerliterarische Bezüge im 'Ritter von Turn''. In: Bachorski, H-J (ed.) *Ordnung und Lust: Bilder von Liebe, Ehe und Sexualität im Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 123–140.
- Chevalier, J, and Gheerbrant, A** 1994 'Tree.' In: *A Dictionary of Symbols*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Reference, 1026–1033.
- Eming, J** 2022 'Misogyne Meisterschaft? Gender als Konstituente in deutschen Fassungen von den *Sieben weisen Meistern*.' In: Bendheim, A, Sieburg, H, and Störmer-Caysa, U (eds.) *Vorurteil und Befangenheit: Kulturelle und literarhistorische Perspektiven*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 207–232.
- Erik, M** 1926 *Vegn alt-yidishn roman un novele fertsenter-zekhtsenter yorhundert*. Warsaw: Der veg tsum visn.
- Foehr-Janssens, Y** 2020. 'Misogyny and the Trends of a European Success: The French Prose *Roman de sept sages de Rome*.' *Narrative Culture*, 7(2): 165–180. <https://doi.org/10.13110/narrcult.7.2.0165>
- Guerson, A, and Wessell Lightfoot, D** 2018 'Jewish Families, Conversion, and the Creation of Stepfamilies in Girona after the Anti-Jewish Violence of 1391.' In: Warner, L (ed.) *Stepfamilies in Europe, 1400–1800*. London & New York: Routledge, 2018, 20–37.
- Kalas, L** 2024 'Embodying Medieval Holy Women: Science, Technology and Medicine.' In: Kalas, L, and Magnani, R (eds.) *Women in Christianity in the Medieval Age: 1000–1500*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kaplan, Y** 2021. 'The Jews in the Republic until about 1750: Religious, Cultural and Social Life.' In: Blom, H, Wertheim, D J, Berg, H, and Wallet, B T (eds.) *Reappraising the History of the Jews in the Netherlands*. London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 105–171. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv20zbkq2.12>
- Kunkel, N** 2023 *Modulares Erzählen: Serialität und Mouvance in der Erzähltradition der 'Sieben weisen Meister*.' Berlin: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110986525>

- Lundt, B** 1993 'Sieben weise Meister gegen eine Frau: Ein populäres Volksbuch aus frauen- und geschlechtergeschichtlicher Perspektive.' In: Klein, G, and Treibel, A (eds.) *Begehren und Entbehren: Bochumer Beiträge zur Geschlechterforschung*. Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus-Verlagsgesellschaft, 185–206.
- Lundt, B** 1997. "Der pfaff der gefellet mir': Außereheliche Lust und List von Frauen im 15. Jahrhundert am Beispiel von drei Erzählungen des Hans von Bühel.' In: Kuhn, A, and Lundt, B (eds.) *Lustgarten und Dämonenpein: Konzepte von Weiblichkeit in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*. Dortmund: edition ebersbach, 285–312.
- Lundt, B** 2002 *Weiser und Weib: Weisheit und Geschlecht am Beispiel der Erzähltradition von den 'Sieben weisen Meistern' (12.-15. Jahrhundert)*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag.
- Maitlis, J** 1958 'Die altjiddische Volksliteratur des 16.-18. Jahrhunderts' *Deutsche Universitätszeitung*, 13: 107–114.
- Opstall, E v** 2023 'The Wicked Stepmother: A Comparative Case Study of the Byzantine *Syntipas* and the Latin *Dolopathos*.' *Fabula*, 64(3–4): 298–321. <https://doi.org/10.1515/fabula-2023-0017>
- Orme, N** 2003 *Medieval Children*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press.
- Paucker, A** 1959 *The Yiddish Versions of the German Volksbuch*. PhD dissertation, University of Nottingham.
- Paucker, A** 1961 'Das Volksbuch von den Sieben weisen Meistern in der jiddischen Literatur.' *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, 57: 177–194.
- Rasmussen, A M** 1997 *Mothers and Daughters in Medieval German Literature*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Reynders, A** 2020 'How Lonely Are Women in *Van den VII Vroeden van binnen Rome*? An Analysis of the Resources and Networks of the Female (and Male) Characters in a Middle Dutch Version of the *Seven Sages of Rome*.' *Narrative Culture*, 7(2): 216–226. <https://doi.org/10.13110/narrcult.7.2.0216>
- Schlusemann, R** 2023a 'Dat si over minen soen gheen macht en hebbe: Gattung und multimodale Semiotik der 'Historia septem sapientum Romae' am Beispiel der niederländischen Tradition.' *Das Mittelalter*, 28(1): 118–136. <https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.mial.2023.1.24771>
- Schlusemann, R** 2023b 'The Dissemination and Multimodality of *Historia septem sapientum Romae*.' In: Blom, H, Richter, A K, and Wierzbicka-Trwoga, K (eds.) *Top Ten Fictional Narratives in Early Modern Europe: Translation, Dissemination and Mediality*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 87–126. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110764451-004>
- Specht, T** 2023 *Der Baumgarten im höfischen Roman: Narrative Erzeugung eines Handlungs- und Imaginationsraums*. Berlin: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110795455>
- Steinschneider, M** 1893 *Die hebraeischen Übersetzungen des Mittelalters und die Juden als Dolmetscher*. Berlin: Kommissionsverlag des Bibliographischen Bureaus.
- Toepfer, R** 2022 *Infertility in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Premodern Views on Childlessness*. Sotejeff-Wilson, K (trans.). London: Palgrave Macmillan Cham. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-08977-0>
- Watson, P A** 1995 *Ancient Stepmothers: Myth, Misogyny and Reality*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004329485>

**Wolf, J C** 1733 *Bibliotheca Hebræa*, vol. 4. Hamburg: Liebezeit.

**Wolf, W** 2013 'Mise en abym.' In: Nüning, A (ed.) *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie. Ansätze - Personen - Grundbegriffe*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 528-529.

**Zfatman, S** 1985 *Yiddish Narrative Prose from Its Beginnings to 'Shivhei ha-Besht' (1504-1814): An Annotated Bibliography*. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University.

