

Queen Esther in Furs: Purim Balls and the Literary Imagination

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Purim balls are one of the most frequent and thrilling occasions for dancing in Jewish culture. After all, balls are a place where people can dress up, dance, flirt, indulge in food and drink, and otherwise enjoy an experience outside of their ordinary lives. As famously demonstrated by William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, balls are a place where young people from different social groups can meet and pretend the normal social rules are no longer in effect. Yet Purim balls appear less frequently in Yiddish literature than in Anglo- or German-Jewish texts. What would it mean to set a scandalous Purim ball in a traditional Jewish context?

This talk takes as its starting point a particularly outrageous Purim ball scene – from Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's 1882 novel *Der Judenraphael* (The Raphael of the Jews) – and asks why a Catholic Austrian nobleman would choose to set a fantastical Purim ball in a Hasidic shtetl. Sacher-Masoch's motivations relate to his own philosemitic approach to Jewish culture but also at times parallel the ways Jewish writers depict the risks and temptations of the ballroom in Yiddish and other literatures. While Sacher-Masoch typically depicts Jewish cultural practice with deft ethnographic detail, the sensational dancing in *Der Judenraphael* reflects the melodrama and artistic temperament of the novel's star-crossed lovers themselves. Indeed, the beautiful Jewess Hadaßka and the Polish artist Plutin initiate and conclude their tragic love affair in the midst of highly-stylized and deeply transgressive dance scenes. The two pivotal scenes of communal dancing (a Purim ball and a wedding) reveal how Sacher-Masoch employs his knowledge of east European Jewish customs for maximum exotic appeal while simultaneously using imagery drawn from Western European high culture to elevate the stature of his Jewish heroine.