

Chapter Title: Flirtation in S. Y. Agnon's Shira

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Book Title: History and Literature

Book Subtitle: New Readings of Jewish Texts in Honor of Arnold J. Band

Book Editor(s): William Cutter, David C. Jacobson

Published by: Brown Judaic Studies. (2020)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvzpv540.17>

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FLIRTATION IN S. Y. AGNON'S *SHIRA*

Nancy Ezer

יושב לו מנפרד הרבסט בלילה בכיתו ואינו הולך לעיר. ודבר זה טוב, שאם בא לעיר נכנס אצל שירה, וליכנס אצל שירה אינו רוצה. לשון אחר, רוצה ואינו רוצה, והואיל ואין הרצון שלם סבור הוא שבאמת אינו רוצה.

Manfred Herbst sits at home nights and doesn't go into town. Which is a good thing, for, if he were to go there, he would stop at Shira's, and he doesn't want to stop at Shira's. In other words, he does and he doesn't want to, and since he is ambivalent, he assumes he really doesn't want to. (95)¹

יצא הרבסט מבית החולים בלא שראה את שירה. לכו היה מעורבב ולא ידע אם מרוצה הוא שלא ראה את שירה אם אינו מרוצה שלא ראה את שירה. ושוב אותה מדה שמצויה ברוב בני אדם ולא בהרבסט בלבד. כשהחליטה דעתו שמרוצה הוא שלא ראה את שירה באה דעה אחרת ואמרה לו כאן היית יכול לראותה. אילו בקשת אותה היית מוצאה.

Herbst left the hospital without seeing Shira. He had mixed feelings. He didn't know whether he was pleased not to have seen Shira or whether he was displeased not to have seen Shira. Once again, a quality common not only to Herbst but to most people was manifest. When he decided he was pleased not to have seen Shira, an alternate view asserted itself: You could have seen her here. If you had searched, you would have found her. (387)

In his book *On Flirtation*, the English psychoanalyst Adam Phillips observes that in any shift of allegiance, in any transition, there is some flirtation. Flirtation sustains the game of uncertainty and sabotages the vocabulary of commitment. It is often an unconscious form of

¹ All citations of English translations from the novel are from S. Y. Agnon, *Shira*, trans. Zeva Shapiro (New York: Schocken, 1989).

skepticism.² People tend to flirt only with serious things: madness, disaster, other people's affection.³ Flirtation in itself, as a means of relating to people and ideas, has usually gotten bad press because of our human preference for progressive narrative and closure.⁴ However, precisely for its oscillation and suspense, flirtation turns the unpredictability of life into a new kind of master plot.⁵ Flirtation can be a source of excitement and pleasure,⁶ and flirtation's implicit wish is to sustain the life of desire. It keeps things in play and exploits the idea of surprise, until the point where the known and wished-for end in refusal, deferral, or sometimes even sadistic denial. As the German sociologist, Georg Simmel intimates, "every conclusive decision brings flirtation to an end."⁷

² Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), xii.

³ In the last twenty years, researchers in social psychology have addressed flirtation as a behavior and interpersonal communication and illuminated the complexity of its messages. See Monica Moore, "Nonverbal Courtship Patterns in Women: Context and Consequences," *Ethology and Sociology* 6 (4) (1985): 237-47; Jerrold Downey and Williams Vitulli, "Self-Report Measures of Behavioral Attributes Related to Interpersonal Flirtation Situations," *Psychological Reports* 61 (1987): 899-904; Matthew Abrahams, "Perceiving Flirtatious Communication: An Exploration of the Perceptual Dimensions Underlying Judgments of Flirtatiousness," *Journal of Sex Research* 31 (4) (1994): 283-292; and Pamela Kalbfleisch, ed., *Interpersonal Communication* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1993). Researchers have compared the approach of senders and recipients (Jerrold Downey and Katharina Damhave, "The Effects of Pace, Type of Comment, and Effort Expended on the Perception of Flirtation," *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* 6 [1] [1991]: 35-43) and men and women (Dorothy Peven and Bernard Shulman, "Current Role Confusion among Young Women from the Viewpoint of Adler's Psychology," *The Individual Psychologist* 14 [2] [1977]: 22-29; Naomi McCormick and Andrew Jones, "Gender Differences in Nonverbal Flirtation," *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy* 15 [4] [1989]: 271-82; Jeffrey Simpson, Steven Gangestad, and Michael Biek, "Personality and Nonverbal Social Behavior: An Ethological Perspective of Relationship Initiation," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 29 [1993]: 434-61). Researchers have also attempted to define the criteria differentiating flirtatious and friendship messages and to measure the effectiveness and the recognizability of flirtation (see Downey and Damhave, "Effects of Pace"; and David Givens, "The Nonverbal Basis of Attraction: Flirtation, Courtship, and Seduction," *Psychiatry* 41 [1978]: 346-59).

⁴ Phillips, *On Flirtation*, xvii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁶ Georg Simmel, "Flirtation," in *On Women, Sexuality, and Love*, trans. Guy Oaks (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 133-52.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 136.

Therefore, the dynamics of flirtation demand avoiding risks and commitment and refraining from action.⁸

The lengthy, unfinished novel of S. Y. Agnon, *Shira*, which takes place about ten years before the establishment of the State of Israel, is undoubtedly a virtuoso representation of the dynamics of flirtation. The protagonist, Dr. Manfred Herbst, is a father of two grown daughters with a baby on the way, and a serious and modest "yekeh" scholar of Byzantine culture at the Hebrew University. He finds himself, in his forties, flirting with the idea of having an affair with a young and beautiful woman and attempting to write a historical tragedy. What seems at first only a fantasy quickly and unexpectedly materializes when Herbst brings his wife to the maternity ward and meets the liberated and opinionated nurse, Shira. What is supposed to be a one-night adventure turns into ceaseless and complicated mental swings between Herbst's love and loyalty to his wife Henrietta and his obsessive attraction to Shira, who stops responding to him after their first meeting. This oscillation and indecisiveness is the heart of flirtation. And, as Phillips points out, flirtation is a state in which one is continuously making up one's mind.⁹ Herbst's compulsive running between the two women provides him with an opportunity to redefine his identity and, in the course of the novel, develops into an additional flirtation with the truth about himself. In order to understand how this shift comes about, we need to examine the tension between Henrietta and Shira as it takes shape in Herbst's mind.

In Herbst's consciousness, Henrietta and Shira embody complete opposites. The contrast between them is rendered through allusions to the traditional tension between Eve, the mother figure, and Lilith, the voluptuous and lascivious queen of demons. The psychoanalyst Nitza Abarbanell¹⁰ uses Freud's explanation of the incest taboo and the Oedipus complex derived from it to account for the existing split in the patriarchal culture between motherly and erotic love. This division, in her opinion, finds its expression in the contrast between the two female archetypes, Eve and Lilith. Abarbanell quotes Freud, intimating that "where they love, they do not desire, and where they desire, they cannot love."¹¹ This polarization is realized in Herbst's oscillation between Henrietta, the motherly, pregnant, and legitimate wife, and the childless, forbidden, and ever-more

⁸ The source for the excitement and play in flirtation lies, according to Phillips, in childhood. Children's attempts to seduce and rival their parents leads them to unconsciously discover the incest taboo while trying to sabotage it. See Phillips, *On Flirtation*, xxiii–xxiv.

⁹ Phillips, *On Flirtation*, xii.

¹⁰ Nitza Abarbanell, *Eve and Lilith* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1994), 14.

¹¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 207.

desirable Shira. The difference between the two women parallels the particular roles Eve and Lilith serve in the literary tradition.¹²

Like Eve, the loyal and submissive wife whose task it is to maintain the family unit, Henrietta is portrayed as a devoted, resourceful, beautiful, and educated wife. Her main concerns revolve around the welfare of her children and husband. She does all she can to enable her husband to concentrate on his research, trying not to burden him with the household chores and the children's education. A considerable part of the narrative describing the couple's relationship is dedicated to Henrietta's motherly care for Herbst's meals and her concern for his physical health. She insists that he eat nutritional meals on time, sleep well, not smoke, and take his daily walk. Henrietta, however, is always tired and busy with the household management and preoccupied with the certificates she is trying to obtain to bring her relatives in Germany to Palestine. She neglects her appearance, and since the birth of her now seventeen-year-old daughter, Tamara, she has rarely been intimate with her husband, claiming that she is a dry tree. Henrietta does not join her husband in his daily stroll, which lasts until midnight, and she never questions him about his whereabouts. The children Henrietta gives birth to during the course of the novel, when she is already about forty years old, are the fruit of only occasional intimacy between the couple; their third daughter, Sarah, was born nine months after Herbst's birthday, and their son is a product of a nightmare that caused Herbst to cling to his wife out of fear and emotional confusion.

In direct contrast to Henrietta stands Shira. She is, like Lilith, an attractive woman in control of her own sexuality, since she is not constrained by obligations to family¹³ or cultural ideals. Shira is portrayed as a *femme fatale*.¹⁴ She is loyal only to herself and to her patients. Independent minded, Shira has been difficult for those who have tried to control her since her childhood. She does not wish to win anyone over to her view, and she is content with the way she is. Insubordination is one of Shira's distinguishing traits. She testifies about herself, "The gypsy whose tune I dance to hasn't been born yet" (245). This insubordination

¹² *Ibid.*, 15, 23.

¹³ The sandal, which is a metonym for Shira's sexuality, alludes also to her barrenness. According to Mishnah Bekhorot 8:1, Keritut 1:3, and Niddah 3:4, "sandal" is a name for squashed fetuses born dead. My thanks to Professor Adina Abadi who pointed out this meaning to me.

¹⁴ Gershon Shaked, "What Can a Man Do to Renew Himself," *S. Y. Agnon: Critical Essays on His Writings* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1992), 2:345; Dan Miron, *Le Médecin Imaginaire* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995), 301–5.

is also a central characteristic of Lilith's nature. Thus, for instance, we read in Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*:

At the beginning until the Holy One created Eve, Adam used to sit bored and desolate, and he was not happy alone. The Holy One gave Adam Lilith to be his wife in order to relieve his loneliness. But she did not last many days in his charge because she did not accept his authority. She said to Adam, like you, I was also created from the earth, and both of us are equal. They would pound away at each other and quarrel. Seeing this, Lilith pronounced the Divine Name which was known to her, and flew away, disappearing¹⁵ to the lighted air.¹⁶

Lilith refuses to return to Adam even after the Holy One sends angels after her to beg her to come back, and she argues that Adam rules her high-handedly. Herbst unconsciously associates Shira's rebelliousness, as evidenced in her absolute rejection of religion and religious people, with a devilish essence. Thus, he jokingly responds to Shira's complaints that an ugly house recently built in Jerusalem hides God's works: "'Bravo, Shira, Bravo. Finally, you believe in God.' Shira responds, 'Can I invent a special language for myself? I was using accepted terms.' Herbst said 'No need to apologize. On the contrary, your slip of the tongue is evidence that the devil in you is not so formidable'" (252).

Lilith is also known for her seductive power to lead men astray (Bereshit Rabbah 23:4).¹⁷ Yet, Shira does not try to seduce Herbst. On the contrary, she attempts to cool him down. Nevertheless, the whole of her physicality and personality stirs up Herbst's passions against his will. The name "Shira" embodies in the novel the poetic wholeness and instinctual vitality of this woman. "Shira" means poetry and song; her predecessor is Naama, who is first mentioned together with Lilith in the Zohar¹⁸ to typify demons that get intimate with human beings. Naama, as her name indicates, seduces with her power to create pleasure. However, according to Bereshit Rabbah 23:4,¹⁹ she has musical talents as well: "Why do they call her Naama? Because she would play the

¹⁵ Interestingly, the use of the verb "disappear" in this context is central to Shira's fate and occupies a key place in the novel.

¹⁶ Abarbanell, *Eve and Lilith*, 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 28. All references from Talmud and Zohar are from Abarbanell, *Eve and Lilith*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 302, 363, 372-74.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

tambourine and sing for idolatry."²⁰ Furthermore, in one of the folk tales,²¹ the difference between the legal wife and the other seductive woman is that the latter is a poetess.²² The irony in the novel is that Shira is far from a poet herself. As she testifies, "If my life depended on it, I wouldn't know to write a poem" (249). Shira's seductive power does not stem from the poetry she creates, but rather from the poetic inspiration she serves, and Herbst is well aware of this fact. Herbst muses, "'You don't need to know how [to write a poem]. You have other talents, Miss Shira.' As he spoke, a faint tremor swept over him and he whispered, 'Flesh such as yours will not soon be forgotten'" (249). Herbst compulsively recites this refrain whenever he thinks of Shira.

The intimacy between Herbst and Shira seen in their first encounter draws on folklore mentioned in the Zohar. According to legend, the demonic Lilith and Naama go out at night and stalk lustful men, teasing and seducing them in order to get impregnated. Yalqut Shimoni 6:18 explains that even the ministering angels would be misled by them.²³ Thus, it is not by mere chance that Professor Herbst, the modest and learned researcher, devoted to his wife and family, is tempted and seized with a violent impulse. The Babylonian Talmud intimates that Jewish scholars are especially prone to the temptation of these demons (Sukkah 52a), explaining that "Every one who is greater than his friend in learning, his instinct is stronger as well." The demons also search for the very finest human beings.²⁴ Like Lilith, whose attraction is fatal, Shira destroys the men with whom she interacts. Like her mother, who in her time abandoned her husband and daughter and ran away with a Russian officer, Shira escaped from the man she married at the age of seventeen, before he had a chance to consummate their marriage. Although Shira does not initiate anything that may wreck Herbst's marriage, and she receives him at her home only as a close friend, her contact with Herbst disrupts the foundations of his tranquil bourgeois life and, in his eyes, undermines the purpose of his work at the university and his research.

Herbst must choose either to surrender to the institution of marriage or to rebel and give up his life to join with Shira. But as follows from the rules of flirtation, Herbst vacillates between the two women, narcissistically

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 56.

²² Ibid., 248.

²³ Ibid., 28.

²⁴ Ibid., 63.

wishing he could have them both and not have to choose between them. This forbidden unconscious wish is symbolized by his appetite for black cigarettes, to which Henrietta especially objects, in addition to the regular white ones. The following dialogue between the couple alludes to Herbst's secret desire:

"Now, Henriett, am I released from the ban?" "What ban?" "The ban on smoking." Henrietta said, "If you must smoke, then smoke. But not the black ones, please." Manfred laughed and said, "Why is that? Because they have a pinch of mandragora, or because they have no mandragora?" Henrietta said, "What's so funny about mandragora?" Manfred said, "Have you forgotten the erotic properties of mandragora?" Henrietta said, "To think that the father of a married daughter and of another whose hand is being sought in marriage is making such jokes! But who can blame you—you are young, truly young. If we were Yemenites, I myself would find you another wife." Manfred said, "You? You would find me another wife?" Henrietta said, "Why not?" Manfred said, "I don't think a European woman could do that." "Do what?" "Yield her position to another woman." Henrietta said, "You've forgotten the wife of the teacher from Beit Hakerem." (207–8)

Henrietta reminds Herbst about the young wife who faced a dilemma whether to attend to her small children or her husband. In this anecdote, the teacher's wife argues:

"'I can't go with my husband because the children are small' ... [and] 'On a teacher's salary, I can't afford to hire help. What's the solution? My husband could have two wives. When he is out with one, the other one could look after the child, and then they would switch.'" Manfred said, "De jure but not de facto." Henrietta said, "What do you mean, 'de jure but not de facto'?" Manfred said, "Those are common terms, meaning 'easier said than done.' What woman could see her husband in someone else's arms and be silent? In any case, I wouldn't subject my wife to such a test." Henrietta said, "Do you ever have such thoughts?" Manfred said, "Me? What are you saying? Me, God forbid." Henrietta said, "You stuck another cigarette in your mouth. You still have one, and you're reaching for more. Another woman, in my place, would see that as symbolic." Manfred pressed his palms against each other, folded them over his heart, closed his eyes, and crooned a song:

"I am tender, my heart pure,
No trace of sin in it;
Only you forevermore,
My sweet Henriett;
Only you forevermore,
My sweet Henriett." (208–9)

Herbst simultaneously wants to smoke white and black cigarettes. This is to say that he secretly flirts with the idea of having a second wife without divorcing the first one: the white one for family and love, and the dark one to satisfy the fire of lust and serve as an inspiration. Herbst's hidden wish echoes the biblical Lamech, who married two women, Adah and Zillah (Genesis 4:19). Rashi explains this practice as follows, "Two women, this is the custom of the Flood Generation: one for multiplication and another for sexual intercourse" (Bereshit Rabbah 23). The ironic gap between the refrain about Shira, "flesh such as yours will not soon be forgotten," and Herbst's love song about sweet Henrietta exposes the cruelty of this flirtation and Herbst's self-indulgence and wretchedness. As implied in one of his dreams, Herbst identifies himself with the painter Böcklin, dreaming that he, like Böcklin, must paint skulls because the jealous wife prohibits bringing female models to the studio (210). Unconsciously, Herbst is angry with Henrietta for becoming old while his vigor is still undiminished. In his dream, Henrietta sabotages his sexual and creative fertility.

Herbst's unconscious desire to be free leads him to wonder about himself. Wondering, a major theme in the novel, also characterizes flirtation. Flirtation is an endless game of doubts and the need to be persuaded.²⁵ Flirting is frequently associated not only with incredulity, but also with ambiguity and logical contradiction.²⁶ Herbst wonders at himself for continuing to pursue Shira even though she is neither beautiful nor intellectual (281). He cannot comprehend what business a researcher like him has with a woman so unconcerned with academic scholarship. To his own surprise, Herbst does not torment himself over his attraction to Shira even though the majority of his thoughts revolve around her. Herbst assumes that when one fantasizes a great deal about something, it loses its intensity. But this is not the case with Shira. He wishes both to see her and never to see her again. Herbst longs for Shira and condemns her. She is both "Shira," the inspiration, and "Nadia," the ostracized. Shira is welcoming, but at the same time she doesn't allow real contact. Herbst doesn't know if he has to thank Shira for this or complain about it. Unlike a penitent who regrets his sinful actions, Herbst regrets his inaction. Since his feelings and desires conflict, canceling each other, he cannot reach any decision or take any action. Thus, for instance, when he imagines that Shira has infected him with a disease that he may transmit to his wife and daughters, "he was struck by the two simultaneous thoughts. One was: Woe unto you. The other was:

²⁵ Phillips, *On Flirtation*, xii.

²⁶ Simmel, "Flirtation," 144, 150; Phillips, *On Flirtation*, xvii.

Now that the facts are known, there is nothing you can do" (300). Flirtation continually sabotages the narrative of commitment, and, as Simmel points out, "it plays off all oppositions against one another and, in a certain sense, relieves the relationship in which they are situated from every burden of a decision."²⁷

Paralleling his vacillation between the two women, Herbst finds himself in a transitional shift of allegiances in regard to his research. Here he also swings between writing a book about the burial customs of the poor in Byzantium, which he cannot tie to a coherent narrative, and attempting to write a historical tragedy. Characteristically, Henrietta does all she can so Herbst can be free to sit at his desk and finish his research. Herbst's interaction with Shira, even though she is not part of his work and she does not know what is going on in his head, stimulates him and awakens his hidden creative power. Without her knowledge, Shira serves as an inspiration for Herbst. Every time he decides to break off his relationship with her, he also gives up the writing of the tragedy. He mentions to Henrietta his intention to write a tragedy only once, and even then, because of an interruption, he is unable to elaborate on it. As far as Henrietta is concerned, this endeavor is not serious, and she never brings up the matter again (457–58). As previously, when Herbst has to make up his mind and act, he cannot accomplish either task; for his book, he continuously gathers and accumulates notes, and for his tragedy, he cannot bring himself to experience the maladies of leprosy that his protagonist encounters. Herbst resembles Tantalus and Sisyphus whom Phillips perceives as the anti-heroes of flirtation. Like Tantalus, Herbst experiences the torture of seeing his heart's desire and being unable to reach her, and like Sisyphus, Herbst is taught through his work the rigors of incompleteness.

Flirtation's effects, however, are not only negative. Indeed, Herbst's life loses its stable equilibrium, but flirtation inevitably brings to it refreshing and exciting elements mixed with a touch of "enlivening torture."²⁸ Flirtation opens Herbst's erotic life to contingency, suspense, and surprise.²⁹ It eroticizes his skepticism and sexualizes his indecisiveness, sustaining his interest and desire. Nevertheless, what started for Herbst as a play for time and a game to defer aging and death³⁰ gradually turns

²⁷ Simmel, "Flirtation," 147.

²⁸ Phillips, *On Flirtation*, xvii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xxiii; Shaked, "What Can a Man Do to Renew Himself," 345.

³⁰ For Freud, according to Phillips, flirtation is the relationship for those who are too fearful of death. See Phillips, *On Flirtation*, xxiii.

out to be a countererotic flirtation with the truth, which can be fatal, as suggested by *Shira's* "Final Chapter." Flirtation unavoidably stops when it is taken seriously.

On the surface, *Shira* seems to be a story about a man's midlife crisis when his erotic and professional life become monotonous and his effort to reinvent himself through flirtation with a stranger and creative writing. On a deeper level the novel is about Herbst's flirtation with the truth about himself. As a scholar who passionately pursues the historical truth, Herbst finds himself in his private life constantly oscillating between self-denial and self-deception on the one hand, and the urge to be truthful in all his dealings on the other. Although Herbst is not fanatical about the truth until he meets Shira and becomes compelled to seek her out again and again, he assumes that he is the kind of person who avoids lies. He is convinced that only from that night spent within Shira's chamber does he begin to heap lie upon lie "in the interest of peace and tranquillity" (537). But this is not completely accurate. The contact with Shira indeed causes Herbst to sway from the path of the truth. However, paradoxically, it also exposes him to the truth about himself. In his own eyes, Herbst is a sensitive, intellectual, modest, and moral man who respects others, especially his wife. Shira undermines this self-image. He swings like a pendulum between his old self-image and his new one, not daring to know the truth about himself but only to flirt with it. In a direct manner and without malice, Shira exposes for him the gap between his conduct and his self-image. She tells him that while in his own eyes he "amble[s] through the palaces of wisdom" (245), the truth is that he strolls for his pleasure in her company while he tosses the household and the children in his wife's lap. Sitting in an armchair, smoking and drinking coffee, he reads all about the lives of saints, contemplating whether he could give up worldly vanities for the sacred life. However, when the opportunity comes to do a good deed and pay a call on the ill, he tries to avoid it, "preferring legends of holy men to an act of charity" (246).

Paralleling the plot, at the rhetorical level of the text, the narrator flirts with his reader in order to hold the reader's interest and desire for reading. Following the dynamics of flirtation, the reader, who is eager for a love story, is both tortured and delighted by the narrator's long and charming digressions and by the progression and suspension of the Herbst and Shira story. The narrator indeed reminds himself and his reader from time to time that these tangents do not constitute the main plot and that he has to stick to the heart of the story. Yet, with no apprehension, he continually delays the progression of the plot, and, with self-irony, he teasingly remarks, "Actually, I have nothing new to add" (92). The narrator humorously compares himself to the preacher in the parable he heard from Dr. Taglicht. According to this story, in order to

validate his ideas and to convince his audience, the preacher would cite one proof after another, though the second one added nothing to the first (317–18). Thus the narrator testifies about his narration and says:

My novel is becoming more and more complex. A woman, another woman, yet another woman. Like that preacher's parable. As for the man whose action I am recounting, he is lost in thought that doesn't lead to action. I am eager to know what we will gain from this man and what more there is to tell. Having taken it upon myself to tell the story, I will shoulder the burden and continue. (319)

The narrator is also like his protagonist: just as Herbst blames Shira, the narrator accuses his protagonist, and like him, he piles episode upon episode and does not complete his story. Since the story doesn't lead to an ending and closure, the reader becomes a partner in the narrator's game of contingency and surprise, where the end seems unpredictable and unforeseeable.

The flirtation between the narrator and his reader can be experienced at best as a thrilling and exciting suspension, but flirtation can also be somewhat cruel and sadomasochistic. The reader who reaches the last line in the novel's first edition (1971) cannot avoid feeling cheated and frustrated when reading, "I will show you Manfred Herbst. I won't show you Shira, whose tracks have not been uncovered, whose whereabouts remain unknown." The frustration of the reader who is denied the wished-for ending is an inevitable by-product of the dynamics of flirtation. The narrator is well aware of this strategy, and he remarks on his profession, "Novelists allow Amnon to die a thousand deaths before he marries Tamar, linking one thing to another, and another, and still another" (555). We as readers might add that good novelists let their readers die a thousand deaths until they allow them to know what will happen at the end of their stories.

The open and double ending of *Shira* in which Herbst finds or does not find Shira is the heart of flirtation, which never leads to a decision. It seems, however, that flirtation is not only central to the narrator's world, but its oscillations reflect the author's consciousness as well. Agnon could not finish this novel and decide in favor of only one ending. The dialectical structure typical to Agnon's novels in which every plot has an unmaterialized counterplot also coincides with the rhetoric and themes of flirtation evident in *Shira*.³¹ In the spirit of uncommitted

³¹ Gershon Shaked discusses the tension between "the dramatic order" and the "epic order" in Agnon's novels, concluding that *Shira* differs from Agnon's

and indecisive flirtation, the author flirts with the alternate option where the other woman (Lilith) triumphs over the wife and family. The trouble is, however, that Agnon cannot come to terms with the implications of such an ending,³² even though he cannot sin against the narrative truth that demands it.³³ Agnon, therefore, leaves the novel to flirt with its double ending.

previous novels. Shaked argues that in Agnon's other novels, the digressions have dramatic or comic functions, or they widen and deepen the novel's structure. In *Shira*, however, according to Shaked, the digressions have mainly epic functions, and they are not an integral part of the psychological drama. See Shaked, "What Can a Man Do to Renew Himself," 352. In my opinion, Phillip's theory of flirtation can illuminate the role of the digressions as a part of the game between the narrator and the reader.

³² Miron, *Le Médecin Imaginaire*, 342–43.

³³ Robert Alter, afterward to *Shira*, by S. Y. Agnon, trans. Zeva Shapiro (New York: Schocken, 1989), 582–85.

