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### Reconsidering the Walls of Literature through Hypertext

Judd Morrissey's prose-poem *The Jew's Daughter* embarks upon a narrative trajectory that seeks to subvert literary conventions and engender new possibilities for hypertext media. The text's form and content challenge the restrictions of print media by making the notion of the printed page malleable. *The Jew's Daughter* dominates the computer screen with a black-on-white canvas that is anything but familiar. Morrissey and designer Lori Talley assemble a solitary "page" that ultimately contains hundreds of screens of text that weave into, overlap, and amplify each other. *The simultaneous ingenuity of The Jew's Daughter and its limitations on reader choice demonstrate a tension between engaging with new mediums and a reliance on literary traditions. Despite these complications, the multivalent digital text marks a radical departure from born print, utilizing technologies to perform crucial repetitions and substantiate divergent literary forms.*

*The Jew's Daughter* underscores its multivalent, disjointed qualities as crucial to the text. Disorienting screens, non-linearity, repetition of phrases and passages (such as "A street, a house, a room"), and a textual ambiguity of prose and poetics dominate the text. Morrissey emphasizes the fragmentary narrative trajectory when the student's lover "laid out a map to plot her course but instead found herself circling all of the little towns that held meaning for her" (241). He rejects sequence in favor of fragments that he arranges disparately. Temporally and spatially, many pieces of *The Jew's Daughter* appear like puzzle pieces that do not fit into the greater matrix. The reader and narrator both must constantly shuffle the pieces around, often to no avail: "Where am I?" he wonders (153). Even Morrissey seems to have trouble shifting the

pieces around: the screen often contains half-words, improper punctuation, and spelling errors as a result of shifting text. The narrator mentions off-handedly, “She told me she was afraid she would never get the content” (163), clearly referring to the text itself. *The Jew’s Daughter* anticipates, or assumes, readers’ anxieties that the text is so fragmented and mutable that it resists identification. Prior to this passage, the narrator reveals, “She needs so much space and then an inhuman touch so delicate to disperse her while holding her intact, in language . . . (Maybe I’m asking too much of you)” (158). The coldness of the speaker’s voice and lack of question mark imply that the reader has no reason to worry about the disorienting, recursive narrative. The text and woman are similarly dispersed entities, but remain supposedly intact. Still, Morrissey seems anxious to assure himself that the permeable, jumbled nature of his text has meaning: “The work exhausts itself against us, and in our impotence we become great,” suggesting that the struggle to comprehend the narrative is the true achievement of *The Jew’s Daughter*, because it intensifies cognitive processes (152). The narrator continues: “I think about how working for her is like taking apart all of these buildings that somehow resemble her in order to make something, some small monument that speaks of a truer architecture.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, as the narrator apparently discovers of his lover, the prose-poem’s disorderly make-up and the reader’s particular method of “re-”constructing the *fabula* make the piece richer.

*The Jew’s Daughter* relies as much on content for its meaning as it does on its non-literary components, particularly its medium and kineticism. Furthermore, the movement of text from one screen to another is startling. The text, N. Katherine Hayles argues in *Electronic Literature*, possesses “a fluidity and mutability that ink durably impressed on paper can never achieve” (81). The text’s ability to move and change on a single “page” separates it from printed

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<sup>1</sup> “The broken sum of its parts is a great agonist. What are we without our histories?” (Morrissey and Talley, 152); “When the sacred builds itself, it dismantles us and it is up to us to reassemble the things that linger in its wake, the brine and feathers that it scattered when it left” (150).

works. This hypertext cannot be reproduced in print because many words and narrative tracts morph, disappear, overlap, or remain as each new screen appears. Morrissey appropriates page paradigm, including font and wide margins, to draw the reader into a supposedly recognizable medium and then manipulates it. The “page” remains static while the text changes dramatically from one screen to another, with new text modifying other text and generating new contexts. The passage “Words are always only words, but these waiting words pause, are cautious, self-aware, know that what is said determines what is has been and will be, what has already not yet happened, what losses are taken and who gets what” (7) morphs into “Words are always only real-time creation, realized under the pressure of days, just as this once should have been realized under the pressure of days” (8). The “waiting words” anticipate their transformation. The use of Flash and computer technology liberates text from the printed page, allowing the textual development of *The Jew’s Daughter* to be remarkably flexible.<sup>2</sup> The recreation of a printed page on a computer screen wholly de-familiarizes print media.

Arguing further that print and hypertext diverge in important ways, Hayles writes that the “new component possible with networked and programmable media is the cycle’s completion, so that the feedback loop runs in both directions—from the computer to the player and from the player to the computer” (83). While the interaction between computer and reader is vitally important, we may also think about this “feedback loop” as being narrativistically or structurally significant to a hypertext such as *The Jew’s Daughter*. That is, technology allows for concurrent succession and looping in hypertext narratives that print does not. For example, Julio Cortázar’s

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<sup>2</sup> Morrissey utilizes multiple incarnations of water throughout *The Jew’s Daughter* to illuminate the fluidity of his language and ambiguous narrators. The ocean, the sea (“I’m going under the sea” (606, 607)), a lake, snow, a storm as the narrator navigates a park with his lover’s dog, and rivers (“the heavy silver river flowing” (459)) function as a persistent theme. The recurring c-section and birthing motif additionally conveys the sense of flow that disrupts tradition and destabilizes institutionalized structure; nevertheless, the water merely dilutes and does not wholly dissolve characters’ identities. Furthermore, the c-sections suggest control over chaos. The “inhuman touch” the student’s lover needs so much is therefore water: an agent that disperses but does not wholly eradicate objects. Computer technology similarly permits Morrissey this fluidity while retaining a certain sense of cohesion in the narrative.

“Continuity of Parks” begins with a man in a green velvet armchair reading a novel and ends with the murderer of his novel stepping behind a man in a green velvet armchair reading a novel. The last line of the short story refers back to the first paragraph, suggesting an endless looping to the narrative. *The Jew’s Daughter* contains similar textual aesthetics. The last line of the screen often may connect to the first line of the screen, constructing a coherent sentence:

“This particular exchange happened in what first Autumn when it seemed” (150, bottom) “to me that the world shifted, yawned open and turned inside out, when the abyss entered the world as living theater” (150, top).

While similar, the hypertext achieves what the print cannot. Cortázar attempts to circle back from the ending line of his story to the first. He succeeds, but only narrativistically: the reader can make the cognitive connection that the story is *supposed* to chase itself, but the printed page limits Cortázar from constructing a real loop. Morrissey actually constructs real loops, in multiple ways. Structurally, *The Jew’s Daughter* often necessitates reading from the bottom to the top to understand the text. This difference between print and hypertext becomes more pronounced with the last screen (608) of *The Jew’s Daughter*. When the reader moves her cursor over “house,” the text returns to its beginning. The hypertext can literally circle itself and begin anew, never ending, while Cortázar’s story cannot. Print limits even James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* from a “complete” cycle or narrative feedback loop because it requires the reader to physically turn back to the beginning of the novel while Morrissey’s hypertext simultaneously progresses forward and continuously loops.<sup>3</sup>

This remarkable hypertext is not a complete rupture, however, from print, nor is it a total embrace of available technology. Morrissey struggles between traditional forms of literature and emerging electronic literature. The reenactment of the print medium suggests two important

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<sup>3</sup> The online version of *The Jew’s Daughter* ends at screen 351; the blue-colored node for this screen reads “WIP” (Work in Progress).

things: a desire to methodically subvert print and, more subtly, an inability to think beyond the page. *The Jew's Daughter* does radical work against the notion of the page, but it also restrains itself quite solidly within the print tradition. It does not escape its own imposed margins.

Entrenching themselves further in the print tradition, Morrissey and Talley exert a quite powerful authorial control over the reader by disallowing independent navigation of the text. While they technically provide a search box, which the reader can use to jump through the 608 screens at will, the natural progression of the text is forward. No “backspace” or easy way to turn around exists. To skip forward through the screens seems to risk missing something crucial to understanding the story (ironic in a text that employs disjointedness and non-linearity). Unlike Judy Malloy’s *Ilove One* or Caitlin Fisher’s *These Waves of Girls*, *The Jew's Daughter* provides no real choice to negotiate the text except for the blue words the author has provided as the marker for developments in the narrative.<sup>4</sup> This in turn invokes the hyperlink, but Morrissey also limits its use. On the other hand, Morrissey invites the reader to engage with the text more deeply than a print model because they must search for the blue “link,” which might be an entire sentence or a parenthesis; whether this abates any frustration is difficult to gauge.

*The Jew's Daughter* is simultaneously aware of its ingenuity and anxious of its limitations. Morrissey vacillates, in form and content, between his technological advantages and a seeming dependence on tradition. These problems magnify the struggle to define the larger hypertext project as well as highlight some of the deficiencies of technology. He provides a possible explanation that resounds throughout the text: “It is at this point (we are not yet at this point) that we” (247, bottom) “need to reconsider the walls and what it is that they announced” (247, top), implying that hypertext writers have reached the moment in which they can challenge

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<sup>4</sup> Malloy and Fisher also maintain some authorial control, by only providing certain links on certain pages; however, Morrissey restricts reader interactivity much more heavily.

the limits of literature and have, equally, been unable to fully over turn those limits. Morrissey nudges the boundaries of literary traditions to provoke innovation. Ultimately, *The Jew's Daughter* indicates a fundamental change in literary history as texts become more fully-integrated with and directed by emerging technologies, coupled with the recognition that hypertext authors stand on the cusp of an exciting yet still somewhat nebulous movement in electronic literature.

Works Cited

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