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Yiddish in Italia: Yiddish Manuscripts and Printed Books
from the 15th to the 17th Century (review)

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We are very far here from Bede's balanced assessment, and much closer to the antisemitism that fueled the violence consequent upon the First Crusade.

Scheil succeeds in his aim of revealing the complexities of Anglo-Saxon views of Jews, their history, and their culture. The image of Jews as an elder people, ancestors of Christians, honorable and worthy of a place in Christian history, took root in the more thoughtful expressions of English writers. Before long, however, those tender shoots would be replaced by harsher and unfortunately more hardy plants with the poisonous flowers of hatred for the Other.

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Yiddish in Italia: Yiddish Manuscripts and Printed Books from the 15th to the 17th Century / Manoscritt e libri a stampa in yiddish dei secoli XV–XVII, edited by Chava Turniansky and Erika Timm, with the collaboration of Claudia Rosenzweig. Milan: Associazione Italiana Amici dell'Università di Gerusalemme, 2003. €80.

Beginning in the waning decades of the fifteenth century and continuing for somewhat more than a hundred years, there was a veritable explosion of cultural and particularly literary activity within Ashkenazic Jewish communities in northern Italy. The texts produced are written both in Hebrew and Yiddish, the vernacular brought by the Ashkenazim when they emigrated from central Europe. It was indeed in Italy that Yiddish literature both experienced its first flowering and matured into a cultural vehicle able to express the breadth and depth of Ashkenazic Jewish culture, and it was there that the "secular" first appeared—however briefly—alongside the traditional religious as a literary modality in Ashkenaz. The broad scope of Yiddish texts ranged from Arthurian courtly epic in *ottava rima* to a philosophical lyric reflecting on the ephemerality of human life, from the earliest love song in Yiddish to a biting and erudite satire worthy of a Martial or Voltaire; from a sophisticated renaissance epic of love and adventure in the style of Ariosto to a love story worthy of the author's cross-continental contemporary, William Shakespeare. In order to grasp the revolutionary aspect of this corpus, one must realize that most of these genres first appeared among Jews during this "Italian century" and they appeared in Yiddish or bilingual Yiddish-Hebrew texts. Many of the genres then disappeared with the linguistic assimilation of the formerly Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazim in the course of the seventeenth century and the consequent shift of the site of Yiddish literature back to central and then on to eastern Europe in

the ensuing century. It was a brief, but dazzling moment in the cultural history of Ashkenaz that produced a stunning array of genres and individual literary works on a par with other contemporary European literatures of the late Renaissance and Humanistic periods, and it was not to be for another three centuries that Yiddish would again experience a similarly explosive century of intense literary creativity (*ca.* 1850–*ca.* 1950).

Only in recent decades has the field of *early* Yiddish studies begun to recover from the human devastation wrought by the Holocaust among scholarly ranks. Much of the best of that work has necessarily focused on the “Italian century,” as is demonstrated in the scholarship especially of Chone Shmeruk, Chava Turniansky, and Erika Timm. Their seminal contributions to the field are made manifest in the magnificent volume under review here. The kernel of the volume originated in a conference on “Yiddish in Italy,” held at the Braidense National Library in Milan in 1996; its central purpose is to present a comprehensive catalogue of all printed and manuscript books in Yiddish from Italy from the period 1450–1600. The catalogue of printed books already executed at Hebrew University in Jerusalem (led by Shmeruk) is here supplemented by the first systematic attempt to catalogue all Yiddish manuscripts from Italy. Each item is briefly described and illustrated by at least one (and sometimes by several) photographic facsimile pages (of exceptionally high quality, although not actual size). The criteria for inclusion are straightforward: the origin of the book must be Italian (insofar as it can be determined), and the book must contain at least a few complete sentences in Yiddish (excepting the works of Elia Levita, all of whose works are included). While the catalogue includes all known Yiddish books of Italian origin from the period, the editors acknowledge that relevant books (especially manuscripts) from smaller and still uncatalogued libraries, particularly in Italy, the former Soviet Union, and the United States, may still surface. In this regard, incidentally, it is surprising that the editors chose to exclude the oldest love song in Yiddish, a brief but quite charming lyric, which exists uniquely on the front leaf of a fourteenth-century (primarily parchment) manuscript of Rashi’s commentaries on the Prophets and Hagiography, originally in the collection of Pope Leo X’s secretary, Pietro Bembo (now Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, C. 282 inf., fol. 1r).

Quite appropriately, given the volume’s focus, the entire book is bilingual, English / Italian, or in the case of one of the essays, French / Italian. The catalogue proper (pp. 1–168) includes eighty-two items, classified by genre: biblical glossaries and translations, biblical epics, prayers, Passover Haggadot, women’s commandments, guides to customs and ethics, anthologies, works by Elia Levita, songs, stories, secular narrative, documents of everyday life,

and non-extant works for whose existence evidence exists. Individual entries comprise: a Hebrew title; author, date and place of publication, along with a translation of the title page (printed books); author, date, provenance, and scribe (manuscripts); a very brief and general description; essential bibliographical data; and current repository. The volume also includes a bibliography, two indices, and six brief essays: Chone Shmeruk, "Yiddish Printing in Italy" (Hebrew from 1982; here translated and updated by Turniansky and Timm) and "Yiddish Literature Beyond the Borders of the German Speaking Area"; Chava Turniansky, "Special Traits of Yiddish Literature in Italy"; Robert Bonfil, "Ashkenazim in Italy"; Israel Adler, "Les sources musicales manuscrites des juifs ashkénazes en Italie aux 16e–18e siècles"; Otto Pressburger, "Yiddish Culture in Italy." The large-format book is well printed on high-quality paper and paper-bound.

A mere description of the volume's contents cannot, however, do justice either to its visual magnificence or its importance in the field of early Yiddish studies. The volume includes 176 clear facsimile pages of the broad range of genres and of some of the most important books and manuscripts of Yiddish literature of the Old and Middle Yiddish periods, which makes this the best, broadest, and most immediately and visually accessible introduction to the wealth of that literature that thus far exists in the scholarly literature; facsimiles of many of these pages have appeared in other publications previously, but no such comprehensive collection has ever been published. This book thus opens up the riches of the Yiddish-language literary life of Ashkenazic Jewry of the "Italian century" as has never been done before. For many it will be a revelation.

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Picturing Yiddish: Gender, Identity, and Memory in the Illustrated Yiddish Books of Renaissance Italy, by Diane Wolfthal. Brill Series in Jewish Studies, 36. Leiden: Brill, 2004. 283 pp. \$146.00.

The purpose of this important study is to question a series of assumptions widespread particularly in the field of art history: "that images of ritual in early Yiddish books are mirrors of reality; that their Christian counterparts are neutral and objective; that illustrations in secular Yiddish books are irrelevant to an understanding of Jewish history; that art history should focus on beautiful images; and that Jews in the past formed a uniform group, who shared the view that rabbis were central and women peripheral to their