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Picturing Yiddish: Gender, Identity, and Memory in the
Illustrated Yiddish Books of Renaissance Italy (review)

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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

society" (p. 203). The author attempts to refute these assumptions by means of an analysis of five "profusely illustrated volumes that were created in northern Italy during the sixteenth century" (p. xxv): three books of customs (a manuscript, Paris BN ms. héb. 586, and two printed books, Venice 1593 and 1600) and two secular books—the romance, *Pariz un viene* (1594), and the collection of fables, the *Ki-bukh* (1595). Since the vague topics designated by the book's subtitle never become the focus of the study, the only principle that attempts to unify the analysis of these diverse materials is the fact that the books are all illustrated and in Yiddish, which as a principle of cohesion is sometimes too tenuous. The author's strength is in her expert analysis of the images and their interrelation with the surrounding texts and their connections with their original audiences. The volume's most important accomplishment is its reproduction in high-quality photographs of 188 illustrations from the five focal books (about half of which are from the Paris manuscript, which are then systematically described and catalogued, pp. 211–250). The volume concludes with a very useful bibliography (pp. 251–74) and index.

There are, however, several problematic assumptions that complicate the analysis, including the author's own unacknowledged "anti-elitist" project, which is manifested in her aggressive challenge to several theses proposed and accepted in the still primarily male-dominated scholarly establishment and in her (inconsistent and contradictory) championing of the work of the non-professional artist of the Paris manuscript. First, she sharply castigates several generations of apparently elitist scholars for their descriptions of the images in the Paris manuscript as "coarse," "comical and shabby," "childish, naïve, and caricature-like," "primitive," and "devoid of all artistic worth" (pp. 5, 20), although she then herself consistently echoes those evaluations in her own description of the drawings (pp. 15, 20, 21, 69). Secondly, she assumes that the audience, patrons, and even authors of books of customs such as the ones here analyzed belong to "the middle ranks" or "an intermediate sector of the Jewish community," basing this assumption solely on the fact that these books are not expensively produced (cf. pp. 14–15, 21, 76). It is thus particularly problematic when she designates the scribe/artist of the Paris manuscript as "a member of the middle ranks of Jewish society" (p. 63), since he is obviously educated enough not merely to participate passively in the textual culture of Judaism, but to synthesize a broad range of texts from that learned tradition in order to produce an accessible vernacular digest, illustrated by pertinent images that function, as Wolfthal aptly points out, almost as glosses on the text (pp. 23–4). When she attempts to forge a connection with Chava Weissler's intriguing notion that the lower on the social scale that a Jewish (male) author

stood, the more positive his valuation of women (p. 76), thus accounting for this scribe's centralizing of women, the argument is less than compelling.

In her treatment of the core theses of work by Robert Bonfil and Chone Shmeruk, Wolfthal's tone often borders on the inappropriate (esp. p. 106). Robert Bonfil's thesis that rabbis were central and women peripheral to Jewish culture in Renaissance Italy (p. 63) was based on a broad range of Hebrew genres from a period of several centuries, that is, a textual corpus generally directed to an audience of rabbis, not women, while Wolfthal's study draws rather different conclusions based on a much smaller vernacular corpus that catered to an audience of (primarily) women, not rabbis, thus in fact providing a valuable adjustment to Bonfil's thesis but without justifying a wholesale repudiation of his position and argument. Her position is at best contradictory regarding Shmeruk's thesis that Christian-produced images appearing in Jewish books are not particularly relevant to the history of Jewish culture. On the one hand, she acknowledges that Jewish books were most often the products of a Jewish-Christian collaboration of author-audience-publisher-printer-typesetter-artist, thus recognizing that reception is quite a relevant issue here: the image produced in a printed Yiddish book of customs functioned—and must be interpreted—in a necessarily Jewish cultural context over the course of centuries, whatever its own cultural *origin* (pp. 109–110, 129–30, 187–8). On the other hand, however, Wolfthal insists that such images may not be taken as documentary evidence of actual practice in Jewish communities, for locally defined customs and the development of those practices are not reflected in such images which remained remarkably static over time.

Lest the reader imagine the present critique a negative evaluation of this volume, rather than a critical engagement with a complex texture of issues, let it be emphasized that this study constitutes in many respects a breakthrough in early Yiddish studies: it focalizes a small corpus of illustrated vernacular books that have been all but unknown and thus unstudied by scholars until very recently and systematically attempts to position them in their complexly layered social function in a multilingual culture. In insisting on the necessary interrelations of image and text, artist and audience, Wolfthal might seem to voice no more than the obvious, but in the field of early Yiddish studies, where so few illustrated texts exist and in which practically no trained art historian has ventured, she thus opens new vistas and forces us to rethink old automatic responses. While the study often aspires to far more than it can deliver, the

insights gained from its systematic analysis of the images are its strength, and it is there that its impact will be most significant.

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Shulamit and Margarete: Power, Gender, and Religion in a Rural Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe, by Claudia Ulbrich, translated by Thomas Dunlap. *Studies in Central European Histories*, volume 32. Boston and Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004 (originally in German in 1999). 336 pp. \$165.

This translation makes Claudia Ulbrich's provocative and highly original work available to an English-speaking audience, and for that Brill Academic Publishers and the editors of the series *Studies in Central European Histories* are to be thanked. As always, Thomas Dunlap has crafted a very exacting and polished translation.

Taking her test case of the unusually rich sources from the small village of Steinbiedersdorf, southeast of Metz on the German and French border, Ulbrich argues that gender relations in an estate-based society were not private or individual, but socially and culturally constituted and endowed with power to shape the structure of political domination, economic life, and culture. The volume begins with a review of some recent literature in gender and women's studies and goes on through detailed case studies to offer important insights into the role of women in pre-modern society, utilizing this orientation to grapple with Jewish and Christian relations as well. The choice of Steinbiedersdorf as the focus of the study is extremely helpful, since there was a large percentage of Jews (about one-sixth of the population) living in a city predominantly Catholic but embroiled in a host of complex territorial politics. Throughout Ulbrich not only taps engaging source materials, but she also culls from tight-fisted sources—often legal cases—a wealth of information.

After providing a general overview of the history and political position of the village, Ulbrich turns to women's and gender history in the Christian and Jewish communities and, in a sense, attempts to rewrite the history of the village from female and Jewish perspectives. While Ulbrich contends that women faced inequality—in the separation of men and women in church or synagogue seating, for example—she also argues that women had recourse to communicative structures not available to men and could develop strategies of and networks for empowerment. Women may have been structurally disad-