

Harry Fox and Justin Jaron Lewis, eds. *Many Pious Women: Edition and Translation*.

*Studia Judaica* 62. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011. xiv + 338 pp. €93.41. ISBN: 978-3-11-026205-6.

At the core of this book, intended for “women everywhere, students of gender studies, Yiddishists and linguists,” is an edition and annotated English translation of one of the three sections of an Old Yiddish manuscript written in Italy in the first half of the sixteenth century and preserved in the Cambridge University Library (Or. Add. 547). The selected section follows a rhymed booklet of women’s commandments (*Seder Nashim, Mitzvot [Ha]Nashim*), a popular genre dealing mainly, but not only, with the specific obligations of women stipulated in the Talmud, and is followed by a homiletic piece concerning death by Menahem Oldendorf. Since the section (thirty folios), which may well be a proper supplement to the preceding one, has no title or colophon, the authors entitled it *Many Pious Women* based on its contents: a series of short texts concerning women, most of them free retellings of stories — drawing upon the biblical text, Rashi’s commentary, and midrashic sources — about biblical women (among them Zelophehad’s daughters, Tamar, Jochebed, Deborah, Jael, Bathsheba) or the role of women in biblical events (such as the Exodus or the Golden Calf). The remaining texts concern aspects of the life of contemporary Ashkenazi women, including pregnancy and labor, breastfeeding and child care, wedding and circumcision customs, religious sewing, and candle making.

The bulk of the book consists of a series of “Introductory Essays” that discuss a multitude of topics in a somewhat disordered and haphazard manner. The first essay moves from a discussion of the nature of the manuscript, the language of the text and its poetic features, the author and his audience, to an analysis of some of the topics dealt with in the text, or expected from a text of this kind, such as women’s prayer, piety, conjugal relations, female exemplarity, and redemption through sex. The second essay (“The Renaissance Context,” 53–126) focuses on the question “Did Ashkenazi women have a Renaissance?,” examining the stance of the author of *MPW* in the “power of women” topos and the debate on the worth of women.

The attempt to investigate an Old Yiddish literary text through comparative analysis with contemporary works of European literature — based on a skilled command of literary theory and criticism, a proper familiarity with scholarly research, and a competent interdisciplinary approach — is no doubt highly commendable. In our case, however, the construction of the mentioned essays

upon an uncritical selection of theories, the employment of comprehensive but quite often irrelevant scholarly research, and the far-fetched application of the interdisciplinary approach, often results in unconvincing interpretations and erroneous conclusions. The main problem resides in the author's insufficient knowledge of, and lack of expertise in, Old Yiddish literature, its language, history, and cultural milieu vis-à-vis his efforts to offer the reader the maximum possible information. Typical and well-known literary and linguistic characteristics appear as hitherto-unknown phenomena or are explained amateurishly; far-fetched comparisons are drawn between completely different texts; severe contradictions between scholars are settled or altogether misunderstood (the author rejects the "spielman theory," but then assumes that the polymath Elia Levita and the rabbi and spiritual leader Menahem Oldendorf were "itinerant-performers," 21–22, 31). Alongside some interesting new insights the essays contain a considerable amount of misleading information, including unclear or mistaken usage of certain designations, such as *Sangmeister*, *hagiography*, and *Judeo-German*.

"The Translator's Foreword" describes the "adventures" of a novice translator who has no command of Old Yiddish and no experience with the kind of manuscript he decides to copy ("transcribe") in order to read, understand, and translate it. After sharing with the reader his own fruitful learning process, and his fascination with certain quite-common linguistic or literary phenomena, he offers the layman some useful practical reading instructions. The edition of the original text and its translation (provided by Lewis) and the copious annotations (supplied by Fox and Lewis), although in many instances faulty, inexact, and incomplete, make a fascinating and enlightening Old Yiddish text available not only to Yiddish readers but also to English speakers.

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