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AN INTRODUCTION TO *OLD YIDDISH LITERATURE: HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES: A SPECIAL ISSUE OF* IN GEVEB

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Abstract: *This introduction opens the special issue on "Old Yiddish Literature: Historical and Cultural Perspectives," which consists of five peer-reviewed articles, an interview, a book review, a report about a critical edition, and a creative work. It previews how these diverse contributions expand our knowledge of Old Yiddish literature, ranging from the epic to the ethical will, from the religious hymn to the mayse, while also shedding light on broader fields of inquiry, such as the study of popular culture, intercultural exchange, and gender. The introduction further provides a condensed overview of the history of Old Yiddish literature, as well as of the history of scholarship about it, in order to orient readers less familiar with the field and to help contextualize the specific interventions made by the individual contributors.*

In 1928, in his *Bilder fun der yidisher literaturgeshikhte*, Max Weinreich assembled "images" or "scenes" from the history of Yiddish literature, "from," as the book's subtitle attests, "its beginnings to Mendele Moykher-Sforim."[1] In this interwar study, he turned attention, that is, away from *modern* Yiddish literature, as it evolved in Eastern Europe during the closing decades of the nineteenth century, and toward what came before: namely, *Old* Yiddish literature, which consists of a remarkably rich and multifarious corpus of texts that extends from the earliest manuscript

[1] Max Weinreich, *Bilder fun der yidisher literaturgeshikhte. Fun di onheybn biz Mendele Moykher-Sforim* (Vilne: Farlag 'Tomor' fun Yoysef Kamermakher, 1928).

known to us, from the year 1382, up to the close of the eighteenth century. While today, as in 1928, this corpus remains less widely read and studied than the literature that emerged in the wake of Mendele (Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, 1836-1917), it is, as Weinreich phrased it, not merely a collection of "old things" ("altvarg"), of interest only to specialists.[2] Rather, it is a collection of texts – often artful, entertaining, moving, or instructive in their own right – that provides, to a large extent, "a key to [Jewish] life in the last half millennium," not least because, as Weinreich and many other scholars have underscored, it was in Yiddish that, across several centuries in Europe, the Jewish "masses" ("di mase") lived, read, and wrote.[3]

This special issue is likewise concerned with the enduring significance of Old Yiddish literature, demonstrating, in particular, its relevance for the study of popular culture, multilingualism, translation, intercultural exchange, and gender. The various contributions presented here speak, moreover, both to specialists and to general readers; for while the core of this special issue consists of new scholarship that advances the field, it is our hope that it will also inspire students and scholars of modern Yiddish literature to explore what came before in all its complexity, strangeness, and uncanny familiarity. In the remainder of this introduction, we thus provide brief surveys of the history of Old Yiddish literature and of Old Yiddish scholarship that serve both to frame the interventions made in the special issue and to help orient readers less familiar with this terrain. The latter half of the introduction provides a more detailed overview of the individual contributions and delineates the approaches and themes that animate and connect them.

Old Yiddish Literature: A Brief Historical Survey

During the Middle Ages and the early modern era, Ashkenazi communities throughout Europe were characterized, beyond the occasional use of co-territorial languages for trade and other purposes, by the parallel existence of two languages: *loshn koydesh* (the language of sanctity, indexing Hebrew as well as Aramaic), which dominated the religious sphere and the elite rabbinic culture, and Yiddish, the vernacular, which served as the language of everyday life.[4] Yiddish also served as a

[2] Weinreich, [Untitled Preface], *Bilder fun der yidisher literaturgeshikhte*, n.p.

[3] Weinreich, [Untitled Preface], *Bilder fun der yidisher literaturgeshikhte*, n.p.

[4] On the history of Yiddish see Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, ed. Paul Glasser, trans. Shlomo Noble, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Neil G. Jacobs, *Yiddish: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). The use of the name "Yiddish" to refer to the language is a relatively modern and not unproblematic phenomenon; on this issue, in addition to Weinreich and Jacobs, see also Jerold C. Frakes, *The Politics of Interpretation: Alterity & Ideology in Old Yiddish Studies* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989), 21-104; and Saul Zaritt, "A *Taytsh* Manifesto: Yiddish, Translation, and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture," *Jewish Social Studies* 26, no. 3 (2021): 186-224. In this introduction, we have opted to use 'Yiddish' (or 'Old Yiddish') primarily for pragmatic reasons, not to deny that the use of such a name raises complicated questions.

written language, and gave rise to a rich literature.[5] Old Yiddish literature, which circulated widely throughout the Ashkenazi world of the time and enjoyed great popularity among Jewish readers, can be divided into two major groups of texts, according to their origin and purpose. The first and more prominent group consisted of translations and adaptations of Jewish religious texts, originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic. These included biblical texts, liturgical and homiletic literature, books of morals and proper religious conduct, and so on. The purpose of these texts was to help the Jewish masses, who lacked proficiency in Hebrew and rabbinical education, to receive basic religious education and thus maintain – and enhance – their connection to the Jewish tradition and way of life. Among the most popular and well-known works in this group one can note the homiletic "women's Bible" *Tsene-rene* (Basel [Hanau], 1622),[6] the *Mayse-bukh* or "book of stories" (Basel, 1602), the biblical epic *Shmuel-bukh* (Augsburg, 1544), and the moralistic works *Seyfer brantshpigel* (Krakow, 1596) and *Seyfer lev tov* (Prague, 1620), all with further editions.

The second major group of Old Yiddish texts comprised translations and adaptations of non-religious texts from contemporaneous European languages, mainly from German. These Jewish adaptations of gentile literature were meant especially for entertainment and pleasure, and included such genres as chivalric romance, novellas, chapbooks, folktales, and songs. Prominent examples in this group are the heroic epic *Dukus Horant* (1382), the chivalric romance *Viduvilt* (sixteenth century), and the prose novels (or chapbooks) *Fortunatus* (Frankfurt am Main, 1699), *Shildburger-bukh* (Amsterdam, ca. 1700), and *Ziben vayzn maynster-bikhl* (Basel, 1602), many of them with further editions.

From the late eighteenth century, as the Jews in the German-speaking territories gained varying degrees of emancipation and gradually integrated into the German culture and society of their surroundings, Yiddish declined rapidly in Western and Central Europe, and Old Yiddish literature ceased to be published there.[7] The center of gravity of Yiddish language and culture then moved to Eastern Europe, where modern Yiddish literature would eventually emerge.

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[5] For important surveys on Old Yiddish literature, all with further bibliography, see especially Chava Turniansky, "Yiddish and the transmission of knowledge in early modern Europe," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (2008), 5-18; Jean Baumgarten, *Introduction to Old Yiddish Literature*, ed. and trans. Jerold C. Frakes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). For an anthology of Old Yiddish texts see Jerold C. Frakes, ed., *Early Yiddish Texts, 1100–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[6] Three earlier editions, which have not survived, are mentioned on the title page.

[7] On this process, see e.g. Nils Römer, *Tradition und Akkulturation: Zum Sprachwandel der Juden in Deutschland zur Zeit der Haskalah* (Münster: Waxmann, 1995); Steven M. Lowenstein, "The Complicated Language Situation of German Jewry, 1760-1914," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 36 (2002–2003), 3–31; Steven M. Lowenstein, "The Pace of Modernisation of German Jewry in the Nineteenth Century," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 21 (1976): 41–56, esp. 43–46.

The first scholars to engage with Old Yiddish literature were early modern Christian Hebraists, theologians, and Orientalists, who were interested in the Ashkenazi vernacular and its culture for many different – and hardly neutral – reasons.[8] Johann Christoph Wagenseil (1633–1705) and Johann Jacob Schudt (1664–1722), for example, included whole and partial Old Yiddish texts in their respective works, some of them with accompanying German translation, whereas Johann Christoph Wolf (1683–1739) meticulously documented Old Yiddish writings in his vast bibliography of Jewish literature, *Bibliotheca Hebraea*, from 1715–1733.[9] Jewish scholars first turned their attention to the Old Yiddish corpus only in the nineteenth century, which saw the rise of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Science of Judaism) in the German lands. The acclaimed bibliographer Moritz Steinschneider (1816–1907), as well as other prominent German-Jewish scholars of the time, such as Max Grünbaum (1817–1898) and Gustav Karpeles (1848–1909), produced the first "scientific" works in the field and thus laid the foundations for all later scholarship.[10]

The scholarly interest in Old Yiddish literature persisted in Germany in the first decades of the twentieth century, especially with the rise of the Jewish *Volkskunde*, or folkloristics.[11] During the same time, however, the field received invaluable impetus with the rise of Yiddish-language scholarship in Eastern Europe, including the pioneering works of Max Weinreich (1894–1969), Max Erik

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[8] On early modern "Christian Yiddishism," see Aya Elyada, *A Goy Who Speaks Yiddish: Christians and the Jewish Language in Early Modern Germany* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Jerold C. Frakes, *The Cultural Study of Yiddish in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[9] See Johann Christoph Wagenseil, *Belehrung der Jüdisch-Teutschen Red- und Schreibart* (Königsberg, 1699); Johann Jacob Schudt, *Jüdische Merckwürdigkeiten*, 4 vols. (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig, 1714–1718); Johann Christoph Wolf, *Bibliotheca Hebraea*. 4 vols. (Hamburg and Leipzig, 1715–1733).

[10] See e.g., Moritz Steinschneider, "Jüdisch-deutsche Literatur, nach einem handschriftlichen Katalog der Oppenheim'schen Bibliothek (in Oxford), mit Zusätzen und Berichtigungen," *Serapeum* 9 (1848) & 10 (1849); Moritz Steinschneider, "Jüdische Literatur," in *Allgemeine Encyklopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste*, eds. Johann S. Ersch, et al., vol. 27 sec. 2 (Leipzig, 1850); Max Grünbaum, *Jüdischdeutsche Chrestomathie: zugleich ein Beitrag zur Kunde der hebräischen Literatur* (Leipzig, 1882); Gustav Karpeles, *Geschichte der jüdischen Literatur*, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1886). On Old Yiddish scholarship in nineteenth-century Germany, see, e.g., Aya Elyada, "Contested Heritage: *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and the Yiddish Biblical Literature in Nineteenth-Century Germany," *Zion: A Quarterly for the Research of Jewish History* 86, no. 4 (2021): 563–591 [in Hebrew]; Diana Matut, "Steinschneider and Yiddish," in *Studies on Steinschneider*, eds. Reimund Leicht and Gad Freudenthal (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 383–409; Jerold C. Frakes, *The Politics of Interpretation*.

[11] See Aya Elyada, "Early Modern Yiddish and the Jewish Volkskunde, 1880–1938," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 107, no. 2 (2017): 182–208. On the Jewish *Volkskunde* in the early twentieth century more broadly see, e.g., Birgit Johler and Barbara Staudinger, eds., *Ist das jüdisch? Jüdische Volkskunde im historischen Kontext* (Vienna: Österr. Museum für Volkskunde, 2010).

(1898–1937), and Israel Zinberg (1873–1939), among others.[12] In the decades after the Holocaust, which fundamentally displaced and disrupted the field, Old Yiddish scholarship began to flourish once again, especially in Germany and Israel, taking two different paths, which sometimes collided but also complemented and mutually informed one another: The path that integrated Old Yiddish scholarship into *Germanistik* (the Trier school), and the one that integrated this field into Jewish studies (the Jerusalem school).[13] To this day, Old Yiddish literature continues to attract scholars and students of Jewish studies, *Germanistik*, linguistics, comparative literature, European history, folklore studies, and cultural studies. In recent decades, the field has made considerable advancement, with studies ranging from critical editions of Old Yiddish texts to anthologies and compilations with and without translation, and from the discovery of hitherto unknown works to interdisciplinary studies shaped by new developments and methodologies in the humanities and the social sciences.[14]

These positive tendencies notwithstanding, the study of Old Yiddish literature has remained throughout the decades somewhat marginalized, especially in comparison to the study of modern Yiddish literature. This can probably be attributed, not least, to the relative scarcity of opportunities to study Old Yiddish –

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[12] Max Weinreich, *Bilder fun der yidisher literaturgeshikhte* (Vilna, 1928); Max Erik, *Vegn altyidishn roman un novele* (Warsaw, 1926); Max Erik, *Di geshikhte fun der haskole-tkufe* (Warsaw, 1928); Israel Zinberg, *Di geshikhte fun der literatur bay yidn* (Vilna, 1929-1937). On Old Yiddish scholarship in interwar Eastern Europe, see esp. Barry Trachtenberg, "Inscribing the Yiddish Past: Inter-war Explorations of Old Yiddish Texts," in *Yiddish and the Left*, eds. Gennady Estraikh and Mikhail Krutikov (Oxford: Legenda, 2001), 208-25; Cecile E. Kuznitz, *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture: Scholarship for the Yiddish Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), with further references.

[13] Interestingly, the second path also characterizes the center in Düsseldorf. On the development of Old Yiddish scholarship in Germany in the second half of the twentieth century see Marion Aptroot, "Yiddish Studies in Germany Today," in *Yiddish in the Contemporary World*, eds. Gennady Estraikh and Mikhail Krutikov (Oxford: Legenda, 1999), 43–55, and Marion Aptroot, "Jiddischforschung – eine deutsche Tradition," in *Jahrbuch der Heinrich-Heine-Universitat 1994 – 1997* (2001): 207–20.

[14] To mention only a few examples (in English) from recent years: Jeremy Dauber, *In the Demon's Bedroom: Yiddish Literature and the Early Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Shlomo Berger, *Producing Redemption in Amsterdam: Early Modern Yiddish Books in Paratextual Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Dovid Katz, *Yiddish and Power* (New York: Springer, 2015); *"Bovo d'Antona" by Elye Bokher: A Yiddish Romance*, ed. Claudia Rosenzweig (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Ruth von Bernuth, *How the Wise Men Got to Chelm: The Life and Times of a Yiddish Folk Tradition* (New York: NYU Press, 2016); Jerold C. Frakes, *The Emergence of Early Yiddish Literature: Cultural Translation in Ashkenaz* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); *Ze'enah u-Re'enah: A Critical Translation into English*, ed. and trans. Morris M. Faierstein (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017); Abigail Gillman, *A History of German Jewish Bible Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); *Glikl: Memoirs 1691-1719*, ed. Chava Turniansky, trans. Sara Friedman (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2019); *Joshua and Judges in Yiddish Verse: Four Early Modern Epics*, ed. Oren Cohen Roman (Düsseldorf: Düsseldorf University Press, 2022); Annegret Oehme, *The Knight Without Boundaries: Yiddish and German Arthurian Wigalois Adaptations* (Leiden: Brill, 2022); Rebekka Voß, *Sons of Saviors: The Red Jews in Yiddish Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023); *Worlds of Old Yiddish Literature*, eds. Simon Neuberg and Diana Matut (Oxford: Legenda, 2023); and Iris Idelson-Shein, *Between the Bridge and the Barricade: Jewish Translation in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024).

even at universities with an existing Yiddish program. Historically, however, such marginalization was perhaps most strongly induced by entrenched albeit dissipating biases about the status of Old Yiddish texts, which were frequently linked, as noted above, with translation and with women and "uneducated" readers and were thus understood to be less prestigious than texts in *loshn koydesh*, which were most often (though not always) the province of learned men. In this light, Old Yiddish texts have often been considered, however wrongly, as derivative or of secondary importance, and scholarship about them has long contended with the apparent marginality and perceived 'inferiority' of its objects, caught up, as Jean Baumgarten has phrased it, in "an emotional atmosphere, nourished as much by its detractors as by its partisans."[15] While these dynamics are, to a certain degree, still at play, contemporary scholars can more easily move beyond the push-and-pull of detraction and partisanship. This is not least because of the work of groundbreaking scholars such as Weinreich, Erik, and Zinberg, early in the twentieth century, and, later on, Khone Shmeruk, Chava Turniansky, and Erika Timm, among others, who mapped the fundamental terrain of the field.[16] These scholars further established the relevance of Old Yiddish texts for research into topics that, in recent decades, have become increasingly central within historical, literary, and cultural studies, such as intercultural exchange, translation and adaptation, multilingualism, popular culture, vernacular religion, and gender. Indeed, the reasons why Old Yiddish texts have sometimes been dismissed, such as their popularity, marked 'translatedness,' and gendered status, are what make them such generative sources for scholars today.

Historical and Cultural Perspectives on Old Yiddish Literature

This special issue includes a diverse range of contributions that deepen existing lines of inquiry and open up new historical and cultural perspectives in the study of Old Yiddish literature. Five of these contributions are peer-reviewed articles. Roni Cohen's article, "A German Tune, a Hebrew Script: A Yiddish Translation of Lutheran Liturgy," analyzes a long-forgotten Yiddish translation of the Protestant hymn "Ich dank dir lieber Herre" (I thank you dear Lord), which Cohen rediscovered in a manuscript from 1637. The translation is, rather remarkably, "the earliest known evidence of a direct transmission of Protestant liturgy to Jewish readers." In addition to a comparative reading of the German- and Yiddish-language versions of this hymn, Cohen discusses the other texts copied by the scribe, including a translation of the German chivalric song "Lämmerweide" (Lamb Field) and a *tkhine*, a prayer for good health. Cohen delineates what these materials might teach us about

[15] Jean Baumgarten, "Author's Preface to the French Edition," *Introduction to Old Yiddish Literature*. On the ideological formation of the field, see also Jerold C. Frakes, *The Politics of Interpretation*.

[16] A very partial list of scholars who, across at least two generations in the postwar period, have shaped the field would include (alphabetically): Hans Peter Althaus, Marion Aptroot, Jean Baumgarten, Shlomo Berger, Jeremy Dauber, Wulf-Otto Dreeßen, Jerold C. Frakes, Lajb Fuks, Dovid Katz, Simon Neuberg, Walter Röll, Astrid Starck, Chava Weissler, and Sara Zfatman.

interreligious and interlingual exchange, as well as about how popular songs and texts circulated across social divides.

Rachel Greenblatt's article, "Women Wrote: Glikl in Context," considers the work of Glikl bas Judah Leib in conversation with other Jewish women who wrote during the early modern period. Greenblatt compares Glikl's writings, which have attracted substantial attention since the late nineteenth century, with the largely neglected writings of Rivkah bas Avraham, wife of Chaim Sinzheim, who wrote an ethical will for her children, and of Beila Perlhefter bas Yaakov Perlhefter, wife of Baer Eibeschutz, who wrote an introduction to her husband's book. In turning attention to a larger network of Jewish women writers, Greenblatt sketches a "shared literary territory," while remaining attuned to "the unique creative impulse" of each writer. Such a "double-sided approach constitutes," as she notes, "an attempt to cast aside contemporary lenses in order to more fully and accurately assess the variety of women's roles in early modern Ashkenaz."

Annegret Oehme's article, "The Writing Werewolf: Rabbinic Identity and Linguistic Understanding in the Old Yiddish *Mayse-bukh* (Book of Stories, 1602)," uncovers the layered significance of linguistic alterity and otherness in an Old Yiddish story about a "werewolf-rabbi," situated in the liminal space between the human and animal worlds. Oehme shows how an intensive, allegorical reading of a short text—a text bound up in larger traditions of storytelling that stretch from Marie de France's "Bisclavret" to Martin Buber's *Legends of the Baal-Shem* and beyond—can shed light on historical understandings of Jewish identity in the diaspora. In her focus on the role of language(s) in the story, Oehme further addresses questions of semiotics, interpretation, and linguistic belonging in the study of Old Yiddish literature.

Oren Cohen Roman's article, "The Catalog of 31 Kings: Thoughts in the Twenty-First-Century on Old Yiddish Epic," centers on a Yiddish poem, printed in 1594, that retells Joshua 12:7-24, a catalog of the kings of Canaan whom Joshua defeated. In his analysis of the poem, which stands somewhat apart from the larger work *Sefer Yehoshua* (The Book of Joshua, 1594) in which it was printed, Cohen Roman explores why such a catalog was included in the work and what can be learned about its authorship and transmission. In so doing, he shines new light on the larger history of epic retellings of the Hebrew Bible, one of the most important and popular genres of Old Yiddish literature.

Claudia Rosenzweig's article, "The Dangers of Being without a Frame (*Con licenza de Superiori*)," reconsiders what it means to read "for pleasure," as opposed to "good" or "pious" reading, taking as one point of departure the fact that, in the introduction to the *Mayse-bukh* (Book of Stories), readers are discouraged from

reading the *Kü-bukh* (Book of Cows), despite the fact that both books contain three of the same stories and overlap in other respects. The article then explores how the *Kü-bukh* can be understood as "dangerous" because, in its lack of a frame, it leaves the "unsettling moral" of certain fables unchallenged. In close readings of "The Peasant and the Scribe" and "The Adulterous Young Wife," which appear in *Meshal haqadmoni* (Fables from the Distant Past) and later in the *Kü-bukh*, Rosenzweig analyzes the semiotic and narratological structure of these fables and reflects on how their meaning changes when, as in the latter, a "frame-story with a strong didactic and moral purpose" is removed.

The special issue also includes a number of shorter contributions that both complement the peer-reviewed articles and address other topics that animate the field at present. The interview with Chava Turniansky, among the most distinguished and influential scholars of Old Yiddish literature, offers a personal perspective on how the field has developed since the late 1950s, as well as a fascinating glimpse into a scholarly life. In a report on their forthcoming critical edition of *Viduvilt*, Astrid Lembke, Tatjana Meisler, and Ina Spetzke recount the textual and translational history of an Old Yiddish Arthurian romance that is based on the Middle High German *Wigalois* from the thirteenth century. They explain their editorial choices aimed at making *Viduvilt* accessible to new audiences and reflect on the importance of this work for scholars interested in the history of Yiddish and German-language literature, as well as in more wide-ranging areas of inquiry, such as intercultural exchange and translation studies. In a review of Rebekka Voß's book, *Sons of Saviors: The Red Jews in Yiddish Culture*, Renate Evers provides an illuminating overview of the major accomplishments of Voß's study and considers it in conversation with related scholarship about the various narratives and visual representations of the "Red Jews," a mythical tribe of "ruddy-faced, redheaded, red-bearded Jewish warriors, bedecked in red attire who reside in isolation at the fringes of the known world."[17] Finally, in a poetic elaboration of *tkhines* – collections of prayers in Yiddish that were often read by women – Dalia Wolfson presents a selection of poems she has written using words or phrases that she found while researching such collections. These remarkable poems not only present *tkhines* in a new light, revealing, for example, the beauty and resonance of "repetition and recitation, of spontaneity and sound, of formulas and folk voices," but also demonstrate how Old Yiddish literature has continued to be a creative resource for contemporary writers and artists.

These contributions open up a diverse range of cultural and historical perspectives on Old Yiddish literature, variously turning attention to long overlooked

[17] Rebekka Voß, *Sons of Saviors: The Red Jews in Yiddish Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023), 1.

sources, rethinking well-known texts, and developing new methods or theoretical frameworks. While each contribution stands on its own, we would like to spotlight a few of the threads that link them and point up their significance for broader fields of inquiry. One of these threads is the study of "entangled histories" ("histoire croisée"), namely the exploration of the interaction, mutual influence and cultural exchange between different groups, traditions, or narratives.[18] It has long been recognized that Old Yiddish literature constitutes a particularly important – and still underexplored – source for investigating the interreligious and transcultural relationships between Jews and Christians in the medieval and early modern periods. In this special issue, readers will find original scholarship about the history of such "entanglement," with a particular focus on popular culture – encompassing music, fables, supernatural stories, and epic narrative – as a site of confluence, exchange, and transformation. Through the lens, for example, of a popular hymn or a werewolf tale, a different and even surprising picture of such "shared culture" comes into view, one that may reflect, as Roni Cohen notes, a "more casual kind of interreligious transmission," as opposed to the picture that emerges from religious polemics or highly charged debates about conversion. In a similar vein, many of the contributions also spotlight practices of translation and adaptation – from German into Yiddish or from Hebrew into Yiddish – and further demonstrate the importance of the painstaking but frequently revelatory process of comparing various editions and renditions of a work that came to mean different things for different audiences over time.[19]

The special issue further contributes to the study of Jewish women and investigates the manifold roles played by gender in the history of literature, religious practice, and everyday life. While Old Yiddish literature was read by both men and women, it has long been associated, however problematically, with women readers – and with "men who are like women" – and was bound up, as Naomi Seidman notes, with the "gender order" of pre-modern Ashkenazi society, in which Hebrew and Yiddish served different functions.[20] Readers of this special issue will find new

[18] To cite just two important works that addresses the concept of "entangled histories," see Elisheva Baumgarten, Ruth Mazo Karras, and Katelyn Mesler, eds., *Entangled Histories: Knowledge, Authority, and Jewish Culture in the Thirteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017) and Francesca Bregoli and David B. Ruderman, eds., *Connecting Histories: Jews and Their Others in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

[19] In this regard, it is also important to highlight the groundbreaking project "Jewish Translation and Cultural Transfer" (JEWTACT), headed by Iris Idelson-Shein, in which a team of scholars compiled and began to investigate the enormous and largely overlooked corpus of translations of non-Jewish texts into Jewish languages such as Yiddish, Hebrew, and Ladino in early modern Europe – work that will continue to generate new scholarship for years to come. See also Iris Idelson-Shein, *Between the Bridge and the Barricade*.

[20] The literature on these issues is large and growing; see, for example, Chava Weissler, "'For Women and for Men Who are Like Women': The Construction of Gender in Yiddish Devotional Literature," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, no. 2 (1989): 7-24; and Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 3. See also Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women*, trans. Saadya Sternberg (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press 2004); Kathryn Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in*

insights into the history of Jewish women who did not merely consume Old Yiddish literature but also wrote it, along with a critical intervention into how scholars have variously understood, framed, or neglected such writing. Readers will find, moreover, a personal reflection on the study, editing, and translation of Glikl's memoirs, a creative meditation on the aesthetics of *tkhines*, and an analysis of changing notions of rabbinic identity, which were no less bound up with the existing "gender order."

Another thread that runs throughout the special issue lies in the commitment to the study of texts on their own terms – texts that range from the epic to the ethical will, and from the religious hymn to the *mayse*. The contributors to this issue variously engage in such study with a focus on questions of language and translation, as mentioned above, and with a focus on questions of interpretation and context. In this regard, they can be seen to elaborate a distinction Max Erik once drew between two approaches – the "philological-linguistic" and the "literary-historical and literary-aesthetic" – that had come to characterize scholarship about Old Yiddish literature.[21] The individual contributors employ, by turns, empirical and text-critical methods and the tools of narratology, semiotics, and cultural studies, while also demonstrating, as Erik himself underscored, how different approaches can inform or mutually illuminate each other. In this special issue, readers will thus encounter new ways to read and to make sense of texts, both those that have been rediscovered and those that have long been available in accessible editions and in translation. The contributors demonstrate, thereby, the intrinsic interest and pleasure of reading Old Yiddish texts, at the same time as they elucidate larger historical processes and phenomena.

Finally, we believe that students and scholars of modern Yiddish literature and culture will find much to be of interest – and even of necessary importance – in the pages that follow. Such readers will find references, for example, to the affinities between the *Mayse-bukh* and H. Leivick's *Der volf* (The Wolf, 1920) and to the links between the "Red Jews" in early modern folklore and in Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh's *Masoes Benyomin hashlishi* (The Travels of Benjamin the Third, 1878); such readers might also be inspired to uncover previously obscured connections between women writers of the early modern and modern periods or between the catalogs of Old Yiddish epic and the "lists" ("reshimes") that characterize much of Abramovitsh's oeuvre.[22] But aside from such explicit and potential connections, the contributions to this special issue touch upon topics, such as gender, translation, and popular culture, that likewise animate scholarship about Yiddish culture in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as attested in other

Yiddish, 1586-1987 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); and Rachel Elior, *The Unknown History of Jewish Women through the Ages: On Learning and Illiteracy, on Slavery and Liberty*, trans. Shmuel Sermoneta-Gertel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023).

[21] Max Erik, *Vegn altyidishn roman un novele*, 5.

[22] With regard to the latter, see Nachman Blumental, "Metaforologishe shtudyes," *Literarishe bleter* (January 4, 1935), 11.

recent special issues of *In geveb*.[23] Taking Old Yiddish literature into consideration can thus provide historical depth and prompt new ways to think about the history of Yiddish literature in the longue durée. Nevertheless, as Jeremy Dauber has argued, there is no need to prioritize "a teleological approach," which would attribute the significance of Old Yiddish literature primarily to its "major impact on modern Jewish literature."[24] Instead, we hope to foreground in this special issue the manifold ways in which Old Yiddish literature has retained its importance and vitality, as a corpus of remarkable texts that deserve to be read in their own right, that unlock crucial perspectives on the history of Jewish culture broadly construed, and that illuminate cultural and historical concerns that have remained pressing throughout the early modern and modern periods and still today.

[23] See Olaf Terpitz and Marianne Windsperger, eds., "Translation: Poetics, Negotiation, Tradaptation," *In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies* (December 2019); Joel Berkowitz, Sonia Gollance, and Nick Underwood, eds., "Murder Lust, and Laughter, or *Shund* Theatre," *In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies* (April 2023); and Faith Jones, David Mazower, and Anita Norich, eds. and trans., "Translation: Gendered Literary Debates in Yiddish," *In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies* (December 2023).

[24] Jeremy Dauber, *In the Demon's Bedroom: Yiddish Literature and the Early Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 1.