Yiddish: A Diasporic Path to Modernity
Andrea Schatz, Organizer
Society of Fellows in the Liberal Arts
April 9, 2006

Workshop Theme

Yiddish was the spoken language of early modern European Jewry between Vilna and Amsterdam, Frankfurt and Prague. At the same time it was a written language, in which a vibrant literature developed that encompassed pious ethical works, frivolous wedding songs, religious manuals, historical narratives, travelogues, autobiographies, translations and rewritings of famous works of Jewish as well as Christian origin. As such it formed a field of transmission and mediation that was central to Ashkenazic society and culture, since here the relations between the various groups of Jewish society, gender issues, the boundaries between private and public life, religious and secular spheres, and the interaction between Jewish and Christian societies, literatures and cultures were articulated and negotiated.

During the past two decades innovative research on Jews and Judaism in the early modern period has fundamentally changed our perception and interpretation of the Jewish transition from the medieval world to modernity. However, while Venice, Amsterdam, and the Hebrew literature of West and East Ashkenaz are studied extensively, the creativity and enormous impact of Yiddish literature on Jewish religious, social and intellectual life -although thoroughly explored within the domains of Old Yiddish - do not yet form an integral part of the larger map of Jewish culture between 1600 and 1800. Therefore, we invite scholars of Yiddish linguistics and literature as well as historians to engage in a discussion that investigates the role of Yiddish as the language of the Ashkenazic diaspora on the threshold to modernity.

In particular, we would like to focus on three areas of research:

- Yiddish as a diasporic language that reflects the changing conditions within the Jewish communities and in the surrounding societies and responds to them -the external aspects;
• Yiddish as a segment of Ashkenazic culture that turned out to be of crucial importance for the dynamics of Ashkenazic culture as a whole - the internal aspects;

• the relevance of Yiddish texts and genres for current research on early modern Judaism and the Jewish transition to modernity: how did Yiddish literature and its interaction with Hebrew and non-Jewish vernaculars reflect and inform negotiations on changing social dynamics, on gender, on religious and secular aspects of everyday life and on the shifting and permeable boundaries between Jewish and Christian worlds?

Workshop Schedule

All sessions will take place in 203 Scheide Caldwell House

9:15 - Session I

Yiddish and the Transmission of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe
Chava Turniansky (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem/CAJS)

Hebrew and Yiddish Books in Early Modern Times: Two Separate and Complementary Libraries
Jacob Elbaum (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

Moderator: Andrea Schatz (Princeton University)

11:00 - Coffee Break

11:15 - Session II

Thinking With Shedim: What Can We Learn From the Mayse fun Vorms?
Jeremy Dauber (Columbia University)

Secrecy and Blasphemy: On the Meaning of anti-Christian Invective in Early Modern Yiddish
Elisheva Carlebach (Queens College, CUNY)

Moderator: Olga Litvak (Princeton University)
1:00 Lunch

2:00 Session III

*Language as a Historical Event: Yiddish in Early Modern Ashkenazic Culture*
Shlomo Berger (Universiteit van Amsterdam/CAJS)

2:50 Coffee Break

*Isaac Wetzlar’s Libes Briv (1749): Traditionalism and Radical Reform in a Yiddish Treatise of the Early Haskalah*
Stefan Rohrbacher (Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf)

*Purim Broadsheets and Brochures from the Netherlands: Facing Modernity with Humor*
Marion Aptroot (Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf)

Moderator: Alyssa Quint (Princeton University)

**Organizing Committee**

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