

Old Yiddish: Old Texts, New Contexts

Project Leaders: Professor Simon Neuberg; Dr. Jordan Finkin

Yiddish Studies today occupies two broad and related but distinct fields. The first is literary and cultural studies of Yiddish and Yiddish-speaking society from the Enlightenment to the aftermath of the Holocaust. The second is made up largely of linguistic and philological analyses of texts, and to some extent their social contexts, from the Old Yiddish to the Early Modern Periods, one of the strengths of European Yiddish Studies. This latter field, however, has had less systematic study and synthesis, fewer conferences and concerted academic attention than its importance suggests or demands. The goal of this project is therefore twofold: to bring together some of the world's foremost scholars in the field to address these gaps and formulate the central features of this systematic approach, and to be able more readily to present these core texts, problems, and questions to Yiddish Studies generally, particularly outside of Europe.

Much attention has been paid recently to the development of the modern concept of Yiddishland as a way of reconstituting cultural authority over a figurative territory. That concept, however, was the cultural successor to the largely apolitical yet no less Jewish geography of Ashkenaz. The primary focus of the project will be to address how our linguistic and textual understanding of the variety of information preserved in Old Yiddish can help us understand the cultural realities of Ashkenaz, and possibly vice versa. The project will focus, though not exclusively, on works of literature, texts which offer a particular set of perspectives on that culture; the goal of the project will be to explore those perspectives and expand their scope. To that end the project will be composed of three related programmes: 1) Research Plans and Methodologies; 2) Language and Text; and 3) Culture and Criticism.

1) Research Plans and Methodologies

Beginning with these categories is a necessary step because few such concerted analyses have yet been done in the field. Understanding the state of the field, as unpacked by some of its foremost proponents, will allow for a breakdown of the questions which its practitioners seek regularly to address; which are the primary subfields and which are those in need of systematic treatment; how can previous work and contemporary work be synthesized or recontextualized. For example, for many years the Fuks edition (*The Oldest Known Literary Documents of Yiddish Literature, c. 1382*) was the more or less standard version of the Cambridge Manuscript, one of the earliest sets of lengthy texts in Old Yiddish. For all of its qualities there are serious

problems and errors. Good work has since been done on elements and aspects of those texts, but we still lack new scholarly editions which systematically take that scholarship into account.

2) *Language and Text*

This programme constitutes perhaps the most thoroughgoing aspect of Old Yiddish studies today, whose strengths lie in linguistics and philology. Here can be included some of the achievements of the field just in the last decade: Erika Timm's *Historische jiddische Semantik* (2005); Simon Neuberger's *Pragmatische Aspekte der jiddischen Sprachgeschichte am Beispiel der Zenerene* (1999); Jean Baumgarten's *Introduction to Old Yiddish Literature* (2005); and Jerold Frakes' *Early Yiddish Texts 1100-1750* (2004). But even here, the issues of defining the corpus of texts and understanding that corpus remain. The connections between, for example, the epic *Dukus Horant* and the Arthurian *Vidvilt*, though intricate, are still relatively straightforward. The threads which connect those works to, for instance, the *Ku-bukh*, *Mayse-bukh*, *Tsenerene*, the poetry of Elye Bokher, and ultimately as far as the life writing of Glikl Hamel are in various states of revealment. Pursuing (even disentangling) those threads and uncovering the narrative that accounts for them are some of the primary goals of the seminar.

3) *Culture and Criticism*

In the first place there must be addressed the perennial—and most contentious—questions of the field, including how Jewish these texts are, whether the earliest of them are truly Yiddish or just slight variants of Middle High German, and where, when, and how the change from one to the other occurred. These questions are important for their own sake, but also for how they inform a new set of critical questions. Among these are to what degree the production of these texts were conditioned by intracultural as well as intercultural conditions. Some of the texts within the corpus display elements which could be described as folkloric, while others belong much more to what we would call high culture. Are these categories applicable or helpful to our understanding of these texts, their cultural position, and social reception? Who were the intended audience for them? Is there a gendered component to their writing and dissemination? What is the nature of the Biblical and rabbinic intertextuality on display in many of these works, and what can that tell us about Ashkenazi literary culture?

This project will be an indispensable boon to enhance and expand the reach of early Yiddish within not only Yiddish studies, and not only Jewish Studies more widely, but for the academy. A recent panel discussion at the Modern Language Association conference on the subject of "The Future of Yiddish" made a point of highlighting the importance and strengths, but relatively limited exposure, of early Yiddish, especially as pursued in European institutions of higher education. This European Seminar project would be a unique opportunity to build on those strengths and make these issues and texts part of the core of academic Jewish Studies.

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