

Introduction

This book is about tradition. But even more than tradition itself, it is about the questions surrounding tradition. The tradition I focus on in this book is that of Yiddish poetry written by women. Yet there are many questions pertaining to this particular body of work, including: Do these poems constitute a tradition of poetry? Did women poets write with an awareness of creating within or outside of a tradition? And perhaps, most important of all, of what does this tradition consist? And what value or profit lies in using it as a critical category?

As a critical category in modern literary cultures, tradition is ubiquitous. The notions of tradition in both T. S. Eliot's 1919 essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's 1983 book, *The Invention of Tradition*, have gained wide currency, if not acceptance. Both Eliot and Hobsbawm have accustomed us to the understanding that every tradition is invented and serves a purpose. Eliot argues that tradition and modern poetry are mutually dependent: Poetry invents the tradition from which it emerges, because the dead inform the living, and the living reformulate the dead.¹ Accordingly, the traditional writer transcends time by means of a historical sense, and the value of an individual talent is attributed to its context. The poet, Eliot says, "is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious not of what is dead, but of what is already living."² Hobsbawm provides a broad definition of what he calls "invented tradition" as it relates to group or national identity: "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate

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certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with . . . a suitable historic past.”³

Concepts of literary and national tradition such as these also pertain to the study of modern Yiddish literature. For example, the Israeli scholar Chone Shmeruk discusses Itzik Manger’s 1935 adaptations of biblical characters in his *Khumesb-lider* (Bible Poems) in terms of Eliot’s idea of the necessary reciprocity of the past and the present in poetry. Shmeruk also identifies the source of Manger’s reinvented archaic verse forms: scholarly studies of Old Yiddish literature in the late 1920s.⁴

Eliot’s and Hobsbawm’s notions of tradition deeply inform my discussion throughout this book. Eliot’s notion of a modern poet’s relation to tradition has led me to ask whether or how texts of Jewish religious practice, which defined women’s roles in Jewish life, are manifest in both Old and Modern Yiddish poetry by women. Hobsbawm’s definition of tradition also brings me to the very different question of how poetry written by women in the twentieth century was received by their male colleagues at the moment when these male poets and critics were inventing a modern tradition for Yiddish literature. In considering these questions of tradition in Yiddish poetry written by women, I hope to uncover the purposes for which tradition was invented, how this invention enabled women to write Yiddish poetry, and to what degree it is still a useful critical category.

To a large extent, this is a book about a book: Ezra Korman’s 1928 anthology of women Yiddish poets. In *Yidische dikhterins: Antologye* (Yiddish Women Poets: Anthology), Korman collected Yiddish poems by seventy women writers who published between 1586 and 1927. The earliest figures printed their poems within an all-encompassing religious context; the poets in the late nineteenth century reflected the emerging ideas of Jewish nationhood; and the twentieth-century poets composed in the milieu of radicalism, modernism, and historical trauma. From Korman’s collection, one might assume that in 1928 women poets held an accepted place in Yiddish literature. In fact, his volume was the first and only collection ever to be compiled in Yiddish to highlight the work of women poets and to suggest that they wrote within a tradition.⁵

In chapter 1, I discuss Korman’s anthology at length and particularly the problems it raises about the idea of a tradition of women writers in Yiddish. I revise Korman’s premise by showing the many discrete

strands of tradition in which women poets participated. Literary culture in Yiddish was never monolithic, but the most prominent and influential writers and critics were men; women writing poetry in Yiddish were often unacknowledged. By studying key women who wrote poetry from many different perspectives, we can better understand how literary tradition played out its role in modern Yiddish culture.

The poets I present in this book wrote in a range of styles under many influences and on many subjects. Yet there is much to be gained by looking at how these women poets wrote in Yiddish about the particular experiences of women and, invariably, about the experiences of Jewish women. Even when some of these women wrote as though they were not Jewish, they made a statement about Jewishness just by writing in the Jewish language of Yiddish.

In this book, then, I do not try to define a single tradition within these works. Instead, I will show how multiple female voices wrote about being Jewish women poets. If there was a repeated strategy common to many, though not all, of these poems, it was the use of “sacred parody,” a term I have borrowed from David Roskies’s important book, *Against the Apocalypse* (1984). The classical example of sacred parody in Jewish literature, both in Yiddish and in Hebrew, is the anti-prayer, that is, a literary work that uses the religious conventions of prayer to deny the very efficacy and value of prayer. A writer will thus deny God’s authority by writing an anti-prayer addressed to that very God. Roskies’s particular interest is the subversive use of sacred parody in Jewish responses to national catastrophe, which deny the very existence of a meaningful tradition by using traditional forms. But women poets use this mode not only subversively but also constructively to reconstitute in a secular literature such devotional traditions as Yiddish *tkhines*, supplicatory prayers for women. Poems written in Poland in the 1920s by Kadya Molodowsky, Miriam Ulinover, and Roza Yakubovitch, as well as poems written in America from the late 1940s onward by Molodowsky and Malka Heifetz Tussman, exemplify the strategy whereby lost or obsolete devotional traditions are reclaimed in poems that seem to reject tradition but actually reinvent it. Many of these poems place this dialogue with tradition into the voices of women protagonists, signifying the poets’ interest in the various ways that gender changes and shapes Jewish poetry.

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However, poems of sacred parody form only one of many threads in the rich tapestry of poetry that women wrote. Some poets, for example, Rokhl Korn, Celia Dropkin, and Anna Margolin, wrote poetry unconnected to sacred parody or, it seems, to any form of traditional Judaism. Korn's poems of the *dorf* (country village) raise issues of class and religious identity by evoking relationships between Christian peasants and the few Jews who lived among them. Many of Korn's village poems, as well as her poems of the city, depict characters who encounter problems particular to women, such as pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, sisterhood, and abortion. Dropkin's erotic poems rarely mention Jewish themes or images, much less social or political issues. But in their unabashed sexual explicitness these poems allude to traditional Jewish strictures governing women's modesty against which Dropkin rebels. When Margolin's modernist poems borrow tropes from classical Greek, Roman, and even Christian cultures, the poet often places these allusions and references within a rhetoric of devotion, whether to pagan deities or to some version of the Jewish God. Moreover, these poems repeatedly raise questions about women's lives, their places in Jewish culture, and their forms of creativity. Not all poems written by women can be understood from a single perspective.

Over the past twenty-five years, many scholars have published studies of poetry in Yiddish by women from a variety of critical perspectives. Building on this earlier work, this book is the first to consider a major corpus of women poets, both premodern and modern. Most previous scholarship has focused on women writers in the modern period. The first essay published in English on women poets in Yiddish, Norma Fain Pratt's overview of the careers of some fifty women writers, appeared in 1980.⁶ My articles on women poets began to appear in 1988.⁷ In 1990 Avraham Novershtern published the first serious article on Anna Margolin as a modernist.⁸ Shortly thereafter, two collections—Sokoloff, Lerner, and Norich's *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature* (1992) and Baskin's *Women of the Word: Jewish Women and Jewish Writing* (1994)—included essays on women Yiddish poets and writers by Anita Norich, Dan Miron, Janet Hadda, Norma Fain Pratt, and me, as well as a translation of a 1913 essay by Shmuel Niger.⁹ Sheva Zucker published articles on individual women poets between 1991 and 1996.¹⁰ In 1994 Irena Klepfisz published two

important essays that took a feminist critical approach to focus on gender politics in the Yiddish language and culture as well as on a number of women prose writers' involvement in the Bundist, socialist, and communist movements before World War II.¹¹ More recent writers have focused on modernism in the poetry of both Margolin (Barbara Mann and Naomi Brenner) and Rikuda Potash (Yael Chaver); the reception of the work of Esther Segal and Ida Maze (Rebecca Margolis); and gender and sex in the poetry of Tussman (Aviva Tal) and Dropkin (Kathryn Hellerstein).¹² In subsequent articles of my own, I have considered the poetry of Molodowsky, Ulinover, Yakubovitch, Korn, and others in the context of Jewish tradition. Works of scholarship that treat female premodern or Old Yiddish writers include Chava Turniansky's groundbreaking article on the girl-poet Gele (known by only this single name) and her definitive critical edition and Hebrew translation, *Glikl: Memoirs 1691–1719*, Chava Weissler's foundational book on the *tkhines*, Devra Kay's study of a *tkhine* collection, and Jerold Frakes's extensive edition of Old Yiddish texts.¹³ Neither these works nor the significant monographs on topics related to women Yiddish writers, both modern and premodern—for example, Janet Hadda's psychoanalytic assessment of suicide in Yiddish fiction and Naomi Seidman's book on cultural gendering of literature in Hebrew and Yiddish—deal primarily with poetry.¹⁴ The eminent books on modernist Yiddish poetry—Ruth Wisse's *A Little Love in Big Manhattan* (1988) and Chana Kronfeld's *On the Margins of Modernism* (1996)—considered primarily male poets.

Perhaps the major achievement in laying groundwork for the reclamation of women Yiddish poets has been the publication of editions of their works, either in translation or in Yiddish, in recent decades: two volumes of poems by Rokhl Korn (*Generations*, edited by Seymour Mayne [1982], and *Paper Roses*, translated by Seymour Levitan [1985]); a scholarly edition of the Yiddish poems of Anna Margolin's *Lider*, edited by Avraham Novershtern (1991); English translations of poems by Malka Heifetz Tussman (*With Teeth in the Earth*, translated by Marcia Falk [1992]); a Yiddish-English bilingual edition of poems by Rukhl Fishman (*I Want to Fall Like This*, translated by Seymour Levitan [1994]); a Yiddish-French bilingual edition of poems by Celia Dropkin (*Dans le vent chaud*, translated by Gilles Rozier and Viviane Siman [1994]); my own English-Yiddish bilingual edition of Kadya

Molodowsky's poems (*Paper Bridges* [1999]); Natalia Krynicka and Batia Baum's bilingual French-Yiddish edition of Miriam Ulinover's poetry (*A grus fun der alter heym: lider* [2003]); Shirley Kumove's bilingual English-Yiddish edition of Anna Margolin's poems (*Drunk from the Bitter Truth* [2005]); and Goldie Morgentaler's English edition of Chava Rosenfarb's selected poems (*Exile at Last* [2013]). Along with these books of poetry, four translated collections of Yiddish prose writings by women have appeared: *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*, edited by Frieda Forman, Ethel Raicus, Sarah Silberstein Swartz, and Margie Wolfe (1994); *Beautiful as the Moon, Radiant as the Stars*, edited by Sandra Bark (2003); *Arguing with the Storm*, edited by Rhea Tregobov (2008); and *The Exile Book of Yiddish Women Writers*, edited by Frieda Johles Forman (2013). Through their cumulative presence, these disparate works of scholarship and translation have given rise to the question of whether or not there actually is a tradition of women's poetry.

The single attempt to address this question directly is an ambitious, lengthy 2008 essay in Hebrew by Avraham Novershtern, "The Voices and the Choir: Yiddish Women's Poetry in the Interwar Period." In his essay, Novershtern raises many questions, but for our concerns, the most pertinent is his questioning of the use of women's poetry as a critical category. Did this construction mean anything to the women when they were writing their poetry? Is this category useful today to appreciate and understand the poetry?

In exploring these questions, Novershtern makes several valuable points. He refutes the idea that women poets were stifled or that their writing was suppressed. Indeed, he argues that not only were women not excluded from the Yiddish literary scene but also that their general reception was positive and that women's writing contributed to the "the variegated nature of the national literature and culture even though its actual dimensions were more modest and limited."¹⁵ Novershtern also argues that women writers did not view themselves as women writers; and he claims that gender is not a central theme in most women writers' poems and that they were more concerned with modernism or politics. In Novershtern's view, each woman poet was a singular voice that had little in common with that of any other woman poet. Accordingly, he asserts, it is pointless to try to find a common

denominator among these poets on the basis of gender. In Novershtern's view, attempts by contemporary feminist scholars to identify a women's tradition in Yiddish poetry only perpetuates the misconceptions and stereotypes held by male Yiddish critics who dismissed women writers, an acknowledgment that Novershtern makes, even though he believes that they were positively received.

Novershtern is certainly correct that there is no single tradition of women's Yiddish poetry, no sole common denominator among women poets, and that the perspective of gender is not the only way to look at these poets. But the fact that there is not a single rubric for poetry written by women does not mean that looking at these poems from a gendered perspective or within the category of women's experience is not valuable. The point of literary criticism is not to reduce poetry to a monolithic, quantifiable entity but to reveal its richness and multiple possibilities. The category of gender is not an end in itself. It is a means to reveal and discuss difference. The real question is not whether there is a single common denominator to all these poets and their works. Instead, the key question is: What were the *many different ways* to write about Jewish women's experiences?

Novershtern's assertion that women poets did not regard themselves as such is contradicted by evidence in six letters written to Ezra Korman in 1926 and 1927. Responding to Korman's inquiries or invitations to submit work to *Yidische dikhterins*, the anthology of women poets he was assembling at that time, four poets in Poland (Rokhl Korn, Miriam Ulinover, Roza Yakubovitsh, and Kadya Molodowsky) and two in New York (Malka Lee and Anna Margolin) each expressed an eagerness to participate and revealed her personal acquaintance with the other poets, familiarity with the poetry of other women, and a sense of herself as a woman poet.¹⁶

Novershtern tends to couch his argument in the hierarchical terms of centrality and marginality, of the major and the minor, which do not allow for a deep look at the poetry itself. As we all know, margins shift—the major can become the minor, and vice versa. None of these hierarchies is stable. Besides, what is the utility in judging these poems and their place within the larger space of Yiddish poetry before these poems have actually been read and studied? Few of them have. The point of this book is to look at as many poems as possible in order

to assess the variety and breadth of this corpus of writing in its details. Only when we have a sense of the full range of these poems can we begin to make generalizations about them. As we will see, women poets did not write exclusively about being women, but they returned repeatedly to the experiences of being female and to the problems of expressing these experiences in Yiddish poetry. In this book I describe a world in which women found many different ways to write about themselves.

Although categories of feminist criticism and gender theory have informed my work, this is not a theoretical book. Rather, my focus is an extended reading of poems and poets. The book is divided into six chapters, organized both thematically and by individual poets. In each chapter, I address three questions: How did Yiddish poetry represent and interpret the roles and lifestyles that traditional Judaism assigned to women? How, in turn, did ideas about women's sexuality and gender shape poems that women wrote? And, finally, how did the ways that the women writers responded to these questions in their poems change the very notion of tradition in modern Jewish literature?

In chapter 1, "The Idea of a Literary Tradition," I argue for the centrality of women in the articulation of a modern literary tradition of Yiddish writing by American Yiddish poets and critics in the first part of the twentieth century. This concept of a Yiddish tradition, expressed in literary anthologies and manifestos of literary movements, centers, first, on establishing a heritage and historical continuity for Yiddish from the fifteenth or sixteenth century through the twentieth; and, second, on articulating a set of secular literary values that are distinct, yet not severed, from religious and folk sources. Through a comparison of two anthologies—Moyshe Bassin's *Antologyye: Finfhundert yor yidishe poezye* (Anthology: Five Hundred Years of Yiddish Poetry, 1917) and Ezra Korman's *Yidische dikhterins* (Yiddish Women Poets, 1928)—I maintain that the idea and the fact of women as writers played a key yet vexed role in the development of the idea of tradition. In a dialogue between these two anthologies, I highlight the ambivalence of Jewish textual tradition toward women as sexual beings, women in their demarcated gender roles, and women as readers and writers of Yiddish. The contradictory terms of this ambivalence come into stark contrast within Bassin's and Korman's anthologies, which, although defining the his-

torical development of Yiddish poetry and attempting to establish a canon, repressed or sequestered writings by women.

Chapter 2, “Old Poems in a Modern Anthology,” picks up on the assumption initiated by Bassin and developed by Korman that the modern idea of a Yiddish literary tradition requires an acknowledgment of premodern textual roots. Although both anthologists began their collections with devotional poems, dating back to the fifteenth century (Bassin) and the sixteenth century (Korman), individually they strove to distinguish between these archaic works and the post-Enlightenment idea of literature that the twentieth-century poets embodied. For Korman in particular it seemed essential to dissociate the old-fashioned religious poems, which reeked of the oppressive shtetl world and especially the association of Yiddish itself with women’s devotions, from the poems of revolution and secularism in the new century. Also in chapter 2, I address the implications of Korman’s ambivalent inclusion in his anthology of four premodern women poets by focusing on the texts and what they reveal about the writers. In readings of six premodern Yiddish poets—Royzl Fishls; two young sisters, Ele and Gele; Hannah Katz (Khane Kats); Rivke Tiktiner; and Toybe Pan—I consider how verse-prayers by women frame the place of women poets in modern literary tradition. An analysis of these six poets reveals the variety of roles that women played as writers, readers, and publishers of Yiddish literature before the modern era.

In the subsequent chapters of this book, I investigate the possibility of constructing several literary traditions through a consideration of modern “secular” poetry by women in the context of the premodern devotional Yiddish poems discussed in chapter 2. This investigation makes explicit some of the implications inherent in Korman’s decision in his anthology to frame the twentieth-century women poets with the premodern poets. Prefacing modern poems with those of a previous era, Korman stresses the different concerns of poetic form and purpose. At the same time, this juxtaposition allows the cultural and societal issues of women’s lives and women’s roles as writers to surface as reiterated themes. A significant number of the modern poems explicitly or implicitly respond to traditional Jewish texts and other devotional sources with a noticeable attention to gender. And often the poets express such gender concerns in the context of the tension that runs

throughout Jewish literature between individual and collective responsibilities of the Jewish writer.

Despite the range of genre, time, and place, and an array of distinctive voices, the writers of the premodern poems assume a faith in God and an unambiguous identification with the Jewish people in the arc of sacred history. In contrast, the women poets of the twentieth century struggle with the idea of lifting a post-Enlightenment individual from the gravitational pull of responsibility to the Jewish community. Although this struggle to establish an individual Jewish voice in relationship to the collective is central to the rise of modern Yiddish literature, it becomes explicitly gendered in poems written by women, whether textually or sexually. By “textually” I mean that some poets directly invoke the popular Yiddish devotional texts associated with women as poetic sources, which they either reject or adapt in their secular poems. By “sexually” I mean that other poets, seeking to define their work as purely secular, appear to eschew the devotional model that they nonetheless invoke through an emphasis in their poems on sexuality. By focusing on poems by women and some of their male contemporaries, from the 1920s onward, I examine the intersections between various modern poems and traditional sources. The complex interactions between the modern literary texts and the devotional models shaped the ideas of Yiddish poetic tradition.

In chapter 3, “Revolution, Prayers, and Sisterhood in Interwar Poland,” my discussion turns to a consideration of four women poets in Poland in the decade after World War I whose poetry expressly rejected the tenets of Jewish tradition and asserted the new values of political revolution, aesthetic modernism, and feminism. Yet even as they severed connections to tradition, the poems of Kadya Molodowsky, Dvora Fogel, Rikuda Potash, and Rokhl Korn reconfigured the ways that Jewish women related to texts and validated the subjectivity of women in Yiddish poetry. The chapter frames this discussion by comparing Ezra Korman’s ideological approach in anthologizing work by Molodowsky, Potash, and Korn with the poets’ own representation of their work.

In chapter 4, “The Folk and the Book: Miriam Ulinover and Roza Yakubovitch,” I examine two women who appropriated the devotional mode and its traditional texts for women for modern and

modernist poetry in Poland in the early 1920s. Ulinover's deliberately archaic language and Yakubovitsh's dramatic monologues of biblical women contributed to an unusual statement of the modern. With an urge to preserve the ephemeral oral culture of the Jewish folk, and particularly of women, Ulinover created a new cultural artifact, the literary folk poem. Through the dialogue between a modern granddaughter and her old-fashioned grandmother, Ulinover introduced a specifically female voice into modern Yiddish poetry. Roza Yakubovitsh focused on "women's topics"—girlhood, marriage, motherhood, barrenness, widowhood—in the concrete imagery of the modern lyric to convey the physical and emotional experiences of girls and women living out roles they occupied in a traditional culture. Especially in her biblical monologues, Yakubovitsh rewrote the canonical models for Jewish women's lives to create a powerfully gendered Jewish literary form.

Chapter 5, "The Art of Sex: Celia Dropkin and Anna Margolin," focuses on two poets whose work linked sexuality with poetic creativity. This chapter moves from Europe to America to consider women poets identified with modernist movements in New York—Di Yunge and Introspectivism—in the 1920s and 1930s. Tensions between the sensual and the procreative aspects of sexuality provided these two poets with tropes that freed their work from the devotional models sought by Ulinover and Yakubovitsh, their European contemporaries. Placing the poems of Dropkin and Margolin into the context of their lesser-known contemporaries (women poets Fradl Shtok and Berta Kling and male poets Zishe Landau, Reuven Iceland, and Moyshe-Leyb Halpern), I consider how the explicit sexuality of these modern women poets in New York conjured up the apparently erased Jewish tradition.

In chapter 6, "Prayer-Poems against History: Kadya Molodowsky and Malka Heifetz Tussman," I consider the post-Holocaust work of two prolific poets in America. Molodowsky and Tussman shared an approach to writing secular poetry that engaged the question of prayer through a distinctive concern with gender. I examine how each poet depicted Jewish women in traditional and untraditional roles—as lovers, mothers, daughters, workers, and writers—as a response to the destruction of Jewish culture in Europe. Here I argue for the importance of gender in understanding the crisis of tradition and creativity

faced by Yiddish poets writing after the Holocaust. Both Molodowsky and Tussman summoned metaphors of sexuality, gender, and prayer in order to assert their determination to continue writing poetry in Yiddish. Molodowsky depicted the poet as an aging woman who tells stories and blesses the candles to perpetuate Jewish tradition. In contrast, Tussman shifted her focus from the sexually charged relations between women and men and between mothers and children to those between a poet and God. She addressed the struggle to write by combining prayer with erotic desire and thus reinvented tradition as a source for continued creativity in Yiddish.

The book concludes with an appendix and six bibliographic essays. The appendix presents letters written to Ezra Korman in 1926 and 1927 by women whose poetry he was considering for inclusion in *Yidische dikhterins: Antologye*. These letters reveal the involvement of these poets in the making of Korman's anthology and the degree to which they identified as women writers. The bibliographic essays expand upon scholarly and other resources for the central figures discussed in chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6: Celia Dropkin, Anna Margolin, Kadya Molodowsky, Malka Heifetz Tussman, Miriam Ulinover, and Roza Yakubovitsh.

Every book has a story, and I will tell the story behind this book. I first encountered Yiddish poems written by women in 1978 or 1979, when I sat across from my teacher, Malka Heifetz Tussman, at the round dining-room table in her Berkeley apartment on Henry Street. A doctoral student at the time, I was struggling to translate one of Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's bitterly irreverent poems for my dissertation. Malka, who had her own sense of dark humor, grew suddenly annoyed with what she called Halpern's "vulgarity" as well as with my slavish concerns with the academic categories of literary study—modernism and Jewish American literature. She fixed me with her gaze and said, "*Du darfst nit nor leyenen di lider fun Halpernen. Di froyen—mayne fraynt—Kadya Molodowsky, Tsilye Dropkin, Rokhl Korn—hobn azoy sheyn gesribn lider af yidish. S'iz geven zeyer shver far unz ale—keyn 'dikhterins,' nor take poctn—aroystsugebn unzere lider*" ("You need to read more than the poems of just Halpern. The women, my friends Kadya Molodowsky, Celia Dropkin, Rokhl Korn, wrote poems in Yiddish so beautifully. It was extremely difficult for us all—not 'poetesses' but poets—to publish our poems").

Malka sent me to the low shelf near the radio where she kept her books of poetry, and I pulled out a thick, blue-bound volume, *Yidische dikhterins: Antologye*. Malka leafed through the book until she came to the first of Molodowsky's *Froyen-lider* (women-poems). She pushed the open book across the table. "*Leyen!*" she commanded me. "Read!"