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Kathryn Hellerstein. *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586–1987*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. 496 pp.

Lauren A. Benjamin

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shame, for in it Chiswick presents a set of analytical tools that can be usefully applied not just to the study of Jews in the twentieth-century United States but for all periods of history.

Jonathan Karp
Binghamton University, SUNY
Binghamton, New York



MODERN JEWISH LITERATURE

Kathryn Hellerstein. *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586–1987*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. 496 pp.
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Despite several decades of scholarship by contemporary critics, it would be fair to say that Yiddish criticism still has a long way to go toward gender equality. Women writers have been largely absent from historical accounts of literature written in Yiddish and the names that dominate the field are still principally those of men. This is not due to a dearth of women’s writing—far from it. Since its inception in the Middle Ages, the Yiddish language has provided a rich linguistic territory for women to express themselves in verse, song, poetry, and prose.

Kathryn Hellerstein’s formidable new monograph, *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586–1987*, makes an important effort to remedy this lack. In it, the author provides a much-needed history of some largely underrepresented female poets. Hellerstein has been working on this project, by her own admission, for over twenty years and some of these chapters are repurposed versions of articles that have been published elsewhere. An associate professor of Germanic languages at the University of Pennsylvania, Hellerstein has published numerous translations of Yiddish into English and was a major contributor to Benjamin and Barbara Harshav’s *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986). As such, *A Question of Tradition* represents the culmination of a long history of scholarship on Yiddish literature.

The notion of tradition is central to Hellerstein’s claims about women’s place in Yiddish literature. As her starting point, Hellerstein takes Ezra Korman’s 1928 anthology *Yidishe dikhterins: Antologye* (Yiddish women poets: Anthology), the 1920 anthology *In zikh: A zamlung introspective lider* (In the self: A collection of introspectivist poems), and Moyshe Bassin’s 1917 *Antologye: Finf hundert yor yidishe poezye* (Anthology: Five hundred years of Yiddish poetry). In comparing these three collections, Hellerstein argues that each of the anthologizers “looked backward” in order to understand Yiddish literature as a tradition that stretched from roughly the fifteenth century to the twentieth (16). Each of them saw the present literary tradition as a continuation of a folk and religiously

devout past. This line of tradition was overwhelmingly male, but not for want of material by women. In the twentieth century, the period in which these poets were primarily interested, women were actively writing and publishing in Yiddish, but they were, as Hellerstein notes “less visible on the literary scene than men” (23). Women poets, when they are presented in these anthologies, are expected to conform to gender norms about what it means to create feminine writing; in many cases, “women’s poetic style [was reduced] to the private, vague, conventional, intuitive, romantic, and appropriately emotional” (34).

Korman’s all-female anthology is notable among these in that it attempted to place women’s writing as central to Yiddish tradition, albeit not without complications. As Hellerstein adeptly shows, Korman’s introduction to the anthology portrays the biological productivity of women as part and parcel of their creative productivity, thus serving to both promote and denigrate women poets. In their presentation of women, it seems that the culture of anthologizing couldn’t help but reinforce notions of women’s poetry as inherently different—and less rationally capable—than men’s. From there, Hellerstein explores several individual poets that are included in Korman’s anthology and provides close readings along with biographical detail. In “Old Poems in a Modern Anthology,” she reads some of the Old Yiddish poems that open the anthology in order to argue that “[her] own project picks up where Korman’s left off” given that “we are now in a position to read these poems qualitatively and analytically” (51).

In “Revolution, Prayers, and Sisterhood in Interwar Poland,” Hellerstein explores the relationship between revolutionary impulses and religious tradition. Through the poems of Kadya Molodowsky, Dvora Fogel, Rikuda Potash, and Rokhl Korn, Yiddish women’s poetry is shown to express the central concerns of their male modernist peers, namely that of creating a secular literature that expresses a complicated relationship to religious tradition. In her discussion of these poets, Hellerstein demonstrates a talent for comparison in which each poet’s work speaks to the next. As an example, in her discussion of Korn’s “Kheshev” (Heshvan), Hellerstein notes that “despite similar imagery [to Molodowsky’s ‘Froyen-lider’ (women-poems)], Korn’s poem couldn’t be more different” (160). While both work with similar tropes, where the latter explores a trope literally, the former uses it as a simile. Such disparate methods suggest that the two actually have very different subjects in mind, reflecting both their ideological commitment and aesthetic foci. In her conclusion, Hellerstein evokes the intertextuality of Yiddish women writers more explicitly; here it serves as a way to highlight two poets connected by more than geography.

Discussion of Korman’s anthology and its relation to *A Question of Tradition* is largely dropped in the following chapters. Although the anthology is briefly mentioned in each introductory section, its main function seems to be the inclusion of the poets that comprise the upcoming chapter. In “The Folk and the Book: Miriam Ulinover and Roza Yakubovitch,” both poets are discussed with regards to their incorporation of folk tradition. Hellerstein suggests that both utilized historical and biblical voices in order to bring past tradition into the present in a modern way. Perhaps the most successful chapter of the book is Hellerstein’s excellent discussion of the American modernist poets Celia

Dopkin and Anna Margolin. In considering these two poets, Hellerstein makes a larger argument about the purpose of a Yiddish literary tradition. She argues the “rebellious, apparently non-Jewish poetry” of Dropkin and Margolin serves to question notions of a woman’s place both as a poet and as a person in traditional Jewish society (244). Hellerstein argues that although often remarkably frank and sexual, these poets express what David Roskies calls “sacred parody” (a term that comes up several times throughout the book) insofar as they use the language of prayer to both question and secularize Jewish tradition. Hellerstein returns to this subject in her only chapter on postwar poets, “Prayer-Poems against History: Kadya Molodowsky and Malka Heifetz Tussman,” the last chapter of the book.

Hellerstein’s greatest strength is her close reading and attention to detail, but there is sadly little about issues of translation. As an accomplished translator, she undoubtedly has much to say about the choices made here, but that is absent from the discussion. An anthology of the poems examined in the book is forthcoming, and hopefully this will allow the reader to read the poems in full—ideally in the Yiddish original along with Hellerstein’s translation.

In some ways, the book also suffers from that which is its largest strength: its breadth. If 401 years seems like a long time to cover, it is. For this long period there are but a dozen poets explored in detail. Since the book skips from the eighteenth century to the 1920s, the title of the book is somewhat misleading. *A Question of Tradition* does not so much chronicle the history of poets during this time as it utilizes several poets to serve as representatives for the somewhat-contentious category of “women poets.” Oddly enough, a fair amount of time is spent on summaries of poems and excerpts that Hellerstein reproduces in the book, and one can’t help but get the feeling that some repetition (such as a reintroduction of Molodowsky’s biography when she appears later in the text) could have been edited out.

Overall, though, *A Question of Tradition* provides an excellent introduction to several important poets who have, historically, been neglected in favor of their more famous male peers. There are many interesting threads that the book leaves tangled and many poets who are still in need of exposure. As Hellerstein rightly notes in her conclusion, “The work is not yet done” (398).

Lauren A. Benjamin
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan



Lital Levy. *Poetic Trespass: Writing between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. 360 pp.
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Lital Levy’s *Poetic Trespass* joins a small but steadily growing group of studies dedicated to the intricate, intertwined relationship between Hebrew and Arabic in the cultural production space of Israel/Palestine. Earlier studies include