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Kirsten Fudeman, *Vernacular Voices: Language and Identity in Medieval French Jewish Communities*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. xi + 254 pp. including two appendices, notes, bibliography and index. \$59.95 in US. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8122-4250-8.

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Vernacular Voices is a richly crafted book that appreciably widens our understanding of the range and significance of medieval Jewish writing in the vernacular, in this case vernacular French. A topic that has largely been the property of a small school of philologists, many of them dead, the French writing of medieval Jews has been revisited in recent years by literary scholars without Fudeman's philological skills (I include myself in that category). Fudeman draws on this work, while plying old and new tools in imaginative ways.

Fuderman's stated interest is in "the roles played by language in shaping identity and culture" (p. 2) and in resituating the corpus of Hebraico-French writing in "the context of OF textual production in general or the history of the Jews in France" (p. 9). She sustains this double-interest through an investigation of a variety of texts, each reflecting the immersion of a medieval Jewish community in French vernacular. Fudeman surveys the history of scholarship on the French of medieval Jews, whose written remains range from OF words or phrases embedded in Hebrew-language texts, often as lexical glosses; to bilingual magical and medical recipes and two wedding poems; to an Old French lament commemorating the burning of twelve Jews in Troyes in 1288. The chronological range of this corpus is from the eleventh century, the date of the earliest known glosses, to 1470, the date of an Italian manuscript that transmits a French-language recipe for Passover *haroset* (pp. 10-11). The alphabet used to inscribe the Old French in all of these texts is Hebrew; the sole extant example of a Jewish text in Old French written in Roman script is Hagin le Juif's *Comencement de Sapience*, a translation of a Hebrew astrological treatise by Abraham Ibn Ezra that Hagin dictated to a Christian scribe (pp. 5, 17, 151). Fuderman's introduction cautiously treats the arguments for and against considering the spoken vernacular of French Jews a dialect (she spurns the term "Judeo-French" in part to skirt this old debate), and frames the chapters to follow.

Weaving biographical criticism and methodological critique, chapter one traces the early and more recent scholarship and the ways in which proponents and opponents of a Judeo-French dialect were influenced by research on Yiddish and their personal tolerance (Weinrich) or distaste (Banitt) for that language.^[1] Fudeman decides that while the French used by medieval Jews was not identical to that of Christian contemporaries, it is fair to call it "French," while exploring the ways its users asserted commonality or particularity (p. 36). Chapter two treats a set of Hebrew-language letters written after an auto-da-fé in Blois in 1171; Fudeman explores the challenges of Hebrew accounts of events that "took place" in French. Chapter three explores the "dual identity" of French Jews by looking at bilingual texts, all of which, Fudeman demonstrates, share the characteristics of Christian OF texts that emerged earlier against a norm of written Latin: they are oral and performative (e.g., magical recipes); preserved in margins or blank manuscript spaces; and often glosses or glossed (89-92). The question is whether or not there was a "Hebraico-French reading public" (p. 116), a question Fudeman answers in the negative.

In chapter four, Fudeman examines two Hebraico-French wedding songs (bilingual in alternating verses), beginning with paleographical and codicological concerns and moving through questions of influence, identity, and historical context (p. 125). Fudeman argues convincingly that these songs were performed for mixed audiences (p. 133), and she makes a convincing and overall elegant case for the songs' attempt to tap popular images of chivalric heroes and noble ladies. By extension, these songs testify to a conscious effort to "create an aristocratic Jewish past" for their audience (p. 150). Fudeman contrasts this remarkably positive self-representation with contemporary representations of Jews in Christian writing. This is a puzzling comparison: the Jewish texts import Christian literary motifs into a Jewish literary context; the Christian examples deploy a literary iconography against a social reality. The epilogue reviews the preceding chapters and concludes provocatively: a Jewish vernacular (French) "identity" is attested not only in the hundred or so sources of the Hebraico-French corpus, but silently, pressing, makes itself felt behind the morphology, syntax, and language of Hebrew writing as well—an assertion that those of us who work in Hebrew texts will have to digest. Two appendices provide the known corpus and a critical edition of the wedding song, 'Uri liqra'ti yafah.

This is a book that should rightfully amaze scholars of medieval French literature and language, as well as those who work on other European vernaculars where Jewish writing testifies to a day-to-day reliance on a spoken French, Catalan, Occitan, Castilian, Occitan, or German. Based on her conviction that "language shapes identity", Fudeman makes a sturdy case for a Jewish vernacular sensibility whose implications have weight not only for scholars of Old French, but also for scholars of the traditional Hebrew genres she sees as permeated by a French way of seeing the world. Whether language is ultimately the foundation of "identity" is not debated here, nor the implications of this claim for the "translatability" of meaning or "self" from one heavily freighted language to another. Still, Fudeman has carefully unfolded for her readers the historiographical journey that first moved this corpus into marginality and even obscurity and now swivels it into relevance again. Her firm mastery of traditional philological tools and modern critical methods is unparalleled by any scholar writing in English today, and this book constitutes a very thoughtful demonstration of how they may be combined with great value.

That said, the literary analyses of the book are more problematic; here Fudeman's grasp is less sure and her readings can be convoluted and strained. *Goliar*, from the Latin *galearius*, is attested in rabbinic Hebrew and refers to a foot-soldier or servant; the word is not necessarily the OF *golier* for a "drunkard" or "debauched" person (p. 65). The association of women and bread in Gen. 39 is not biblical (p. 139) but from the twelfth-century exegete R. Solomon b. Isaac in Troyes ("Rashi"), who succinctly glosses Gen. 39:7's description of Potiphar placing all he owned in Joseph's hands "except for the bread he ate" as "*Except for the bread, i.e., his wife..*" As for the myth of Jewish male menstruation, which Fudeman treats as a contrast to Jewish self-portraiture (p. 144), Willis Johnson's brilliant 1998 study proved that this was largely a modern invention.[2] *Vernacular Voices* occasionally tries to bolster a reading on a generalization drawn from work on other kinds of literature, for instance Gabrielle Spiegel's argument that social and political upheaval finds echoes in new literary affirmations of identity, which Fudeman enlists to explain the rise of Hebraico-French writing (pp. 148-49). But is it not also possible that vernacular composition did not "rise" so much as its documentation, reflecting not greater prevalence but the erosion of inhibition against preserving it? This, in turn, might reflect the increasing shakiness of traditional forms of social and literary control that accompanied growing persecution.

The burning of thirty two (or thirty three) Blois Jews in 1171, treated in chapter two, marked a sea change for northern French Jews; it was the first time that a Christian secular ruler, in this case Count Thibault of Blois, had prosecuted his Jews and brought them to death.[3] The incident is well-documented in Jewish sources in multiple genres. Fudeman treats the Hebrew prose letters, focusing on the letter sent to surrounding communities from Orleans. Fudeman claims, as I have also, that this letter was predominantly intended to notify other Jews of what had happened.

Fudeman's analysis focuses on several features of the Blois letters (silence v. speech, public v. private speech, gender and language). Underlying her reading is the claim that the Orleans letter elaborates upon without ever citing the biblical text of Prov. 6:16-19, whose condemnation of "one who sows discord in a family" she sees reflected in an apparent digression describing the rash elopement of a young Jewish boy and girl from nearby Loches (p. 67). In fact, the Loches incident embeds several themes found in the Blois narrative: it involves a personal and transgressive relationship that threatens communal well-being; it includes a case of false testimony to Christian authorities; it is resolved with the successful intervention of Jewish leaders who pay off those authorities, a remedy attempted unsuccessfully in Blois. Whether whatever happened in Loches stoked the resentment of Blois authorities we cannot know. But if the Orleans writers wished us to read the moral counsel of Prov. 6:16-19 as the explanatory backdrop to Blois, they would have tapped the language of these verses explicitly. A biblical text that is "never adduced openly" (p. 69) would not be asked to bear that burden. Likewise, the juxtaposition of speech with openness and silence with deceit does not hold up under scrutiny. Pucelline is never silenced. She is repeatedly described as engaged in speech, from her disdainful treatment of the townspeople to her attempts to get her jailers to let her speak to the Count. The letter specifically notes that her conditions of confinement are not only superior to her fellow Jews', but that she is free to speak to whomever she wishes *except for the Count*. Fudeman argues that "Pucelline and other women like her" (moneylenders? widows?) (p. 85) were restricted in their roles by the cultural forces that confined their speech to the realm of the private and informal, in contrast to the official and public discourse of men. This confuses the actual types of communication possible between Pucelline and the Count (whatever their personal relationship) with the ways that Hebrew literature could represent them. Not everything that happens in French can break the surface of its Hebrew record.

Perhaps most curiously in a work this scrupulous about definitions and details, the "identity" in whose cause Fudeman's medieval French Jews enlisted their vernacular is never defined. What precisely—or even imprecisely—is meant by the "identity" of a medieval Jew or Christian living in medieval France and why, or how, is that construct key to our understanding of the relations between them? How does it drive cultural, political, religious, even economic production, or inform the encounters between Jews and Christians, which sometimes intersected in violence and sometimes in pacific unease? What, after all, is this "identity" we seek in the past, and whose assertion comes with the illusion of continuity, when, on the contrary, we might be better guided to ask what made medieval (or early to post-modern) French (or Castilian, Provençal, Maghrebi or Italian) Jewish (or Christian or Muslim) "identity" *change*? For in restoring change, we restore history, and with the claims of history we restore questions of power, politics, institutions and identity-structures as well.

Equally important is the need to be cautious when imposing our own pluralistic and inclusive ideals on a medieval world. Do the Hebrew-French wedding songs analyzed in chapter three express a preoccupation with "membership in a society that rejected them on many levels" (p. 146)? I rather doubt it. There are plenty of indications that medieval French Jews never sought inclusion in French Christian society in the modern sense of full integration. Very much like their Christian neighbors, they wished to remain legally, religiously, and politically separate—albeit free to pursue longevity and prosperity without harassment. In the end, this was not possible, not because Christian society failed to offer inclusion to its Jewish minority so much as because it failed to tolerate its undiminished desire for difference.

Altogether, this is an important book and one that I hope illumines for new readers the place of a little-known corpus of medieval French writing, while asking us all to think harder about the forces that made it flourish then disappear.

NOTES

[1] Both men were prolific scholars. See, e.g., Menahem Banitt, "Une langue fantôme: le judéo-français." *Revue de linguistique romane* 27 (1963): 245-94; and Max Weinrich, "The Jewish languages of Romance stock and their relation to earliest Yiddish," *Romance Philology* 9 (1955-56): 403-28.

[2] Willis Johnson, "The Myth of Jewish Male Menses," *Journal of Medieval History* 24.3 (1998): 273-295.

[3] Susan L. Einbinder, "Pucellina of Blois: Romantic Myths and Narrative Conventions," *Jewish History* 12.1 (1998): 29-46; *Beautiful Death: Jewish Poetry and Martyrdom in Medieval France* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

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