

# לקט

יִיִדִישֶׁע שטודיעס היינט

**Jiddistik heute**

**Yiddish Studies Today**

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Der vorliegende Sammelband *לקט* eröffnet eine neue Reihe wissenschaftlicher Studien zur Jiddistik sowie philologischer Editionen und Studienausgaben jiddischer Literatur. Jiddisch, Englisch und Deutsch stehen als Publikationssprachen gleichberechtigt nebeneinander.

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יִיִּדִישׁ אױסגאַבעס און פֿאַרשונג

Jiddistik Edition & Forschung

Yiddish Editions & Research

Herausgegeben von Marion Aptroot, Efrat Gal-Ed,  
Roland Gruschka und Simon Neuberg

Band 1



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## Against “Girl Songs”

### Gender and Sex in a Yiddish Modernist Journal

This article presents poems by women in שריפטן, a modernist Yiddish miscellany published in New York between 1912 and 1926. These poems are shot through with sexual language and situations, which reflect varying ideas about gender held by the poets themselves and the editors of the journal. Considering the gendered authorship and the sexual themes of these poems, I will attempt to articulate what these poets and their New York editors assumed about women and Yiddish poetry.

We must first consider what kind of a place זאמלבוך שריפטן initially made for women poets. The novelist and poet David Ignatov established this serialized miscellany to present the works of the immigrant avant-garde poets who, after the publication of their collection די יונגע in 1908, had been derisively labeled די יונגע by the mainstream Yiddish press. In the first issue of שריפטן, in 1912, Reuven Iceland wrote an essay that reclaimed the appellation די יונגע from its dismissive intent, by explaining the aims of and evaluating the 15 poets he considered part of the group.<sup>1</sup> Even while reluctantly accepting the idea that these poets did form something of a literary movement, Iceland insisted on distinguishing among the distinct talents and individual styles of these “young poets.”<sup>2</sup> Iceland credited them all with “a proud separatism” (אַ שטאַלצן סעפּאַראַטיזם) that stands in contrast to “the gray, monotonous life of the American Jewish street, in which ‘the youth’ (די יונגע) appear to live collectively; where all is raw, base, and materialistic; where there is no trace of tradition and where the overblown yellow press kills off every taste for things that depart from the ordinary banal sort.”<sup>3</sup> For Iceland, “the deep seriousness with which the ‘Yunge’ devote themselves to their calling” offsets the threat of “*the Future* (די צוקונפֿט) –

*For their comments and suggestions on early drafts of the essay and translations, I am grateful to the members of the Philadelphia Women Writers Group – Cynthia Baughman, Deborah Burnham, Carolyn Daffron, Adele Aron Greenspun, Emilie Harting, and Carolyn Raskin, as well as to Bethany Wiggin, and to David Stern.*

1 Iceland 1912: 1–20.

2 Ibid.: 20.

3 Ibid.

that dark labyrinth that terrifies American Jewish life like a demon and threatens to swallow it.”<sup>4</sup>

The poets whom Iceland named as having participated in the earlier Yunge publications – ליטעראַטור – and now טרוים און ווירקלעכקייט, ליטעראַטור – שרייפטן – included eleven men and one woman. According to Iceland, the older poets Avrom Reyzen, Josef Rolnik, and Yehoash served as models for the newer voices of Yoel Slonik, D. Rozenblat, Mani Leyb, Zishe Landau, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, I. J. Schwartz, Josef Bank, and E. L. Flayshman. Iceland devoted most of his article to analyzing the poetry of these figures, in order to distinguish each by the distinct gifts offered to the future of Yiddish literature.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the article, Iceland added a list of four younger writers, “all of whom are poets with talent, who will perhaps yet develop nicely”<sup>6</sup>: three men – M. Bassin, A. M. Dillon, and L. Miller – and a lone woman, Fradl Shtok.<sup>7</sup>

Despite his mention of Fradl Shtok in this list, the American “future” into which Iceland peered seems to have included women poets only by chance. Dovid Ignatov, the publisher and editor of שרייפטן, which came out as nine issues in eight thick, hardbound, illustrated volumes, from 1912–1914, from 1919–1921, and in 1925/1926, did not publish poems by any women poets until the Summer issue of 1919. Thereafter, שרייפטן published a total of eleven poems by six women poets: Eda Glazer, Roshelle Veprinski, Celia Dropkin, Esther Pevzner, Berta Kling, and Malka Lee.

Rather than publish a poem by the promising Fradl Shtok, though, the 1912 שרייפטן presented an impersonation of a woman poet in Zishe Landau’s sequence of four מיידלשע געזאַנגען (Girl Songs).<sup>8</sup> Here are the four sections of Landau’s poem with my translation:

1

איך קוק אויפֿן זייגער,	I keep looking at the clock,
דאָס האַרץ גייט אויס פֿאַר שרעק.	My heart expires in fright.
כ׳וועל זיבן – שרײַבסטו – קומען	You write – I’ll come at seven,
און אַכט איז שוין אַוועק.	And now it’s after eight.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.: 4–19.

6 Ibid.: 20.

7 Ibid.

8 Landau 1912: 6f.



<p>דאָס אַוונטברויט צו עסן האַב איך היינט נישט געקענט, -- געצערטלט מיר די פֿינגער, -- דו קושסט דאָך מײנע הענט.</p> <p>איך ווייס ניט צי געדענקסטו, ווי ס'האַט אַמאָל דיין האַנט די האַר מיר – איך זאָג קיין ליגן – געגלעט שטיל נאָך אַנאַנד –</p> <p>כ'האַב זיי באַדעקט מיט קושן און ליב אַזוי פֿאַרקעמט, „אַ שיינע מיידל בין איך“ געמורמלט האַלב פֿאַרשעמט.</p> <p>דו קום נאָר, קום נאָר גיכער, דער זייגער שלאָגט שוין ניין! מיר וועלן ביידע זיצן אין גרויסן טאָג אַרײַן.</p>	<p>Today I am unable To eat the evening bread – Fondling my fingers, – You kiss my hands.</p> <p>I don't know if you remember How once – I tell no lie – Your hands stroked and stroked My hair quietly –</p> <p>I covered them with kisses And love – your combing hands, “I am a pretty girl” I murmured, half ashamed.</p> <p>Come now, but come quicker, The clock is striking nine! And we will sit together 'Til the sun begins to shine.<sup>9</sup></p>
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## 2

<p>דו ניט צייל נאָר מײנע יאָרן און די קנייטשן פֿון מײַן שטערן, איך בין ייִנגער שוין געוואָרן טראַכטנדיק: כ'ועל דיִינע ווערן.</p> <p>ס'נעמט אַ פֿרייד דאָס האַרץ מיר קלעמען, -- כ'זאָל נאָר ניט דעם קאַפּ פֿאַרלירן, -- -- דו וועסט קומען, וועסט מיך נעמען, וועסט אַהיים צו זיך מיך פֿירן.</p> <p>אַלט וועל איך פֿון פֿראַצע ווערן איידער ס'וועט די עלטער קומען. גוט! ווען ס'וועט נאָר גאָט באַשערן, אַ אַ קינד צום יאָר זאָל קומען.</p> <p>זינגענדיק וועל איך פֿאַרוויגן ס'קינד צוזאַמען מיט מײַן טרויער... און אין פֿיין זיך יאָרן וויגן, און איך ווער מיר גרויער, גרויער...</p>	<p>Don't just count my years, you, And the wrinkles on my brow, I have already grown younger Thinking: I will soon be yours.</p> <p>My heart pinches me with pleasure – But I should not lose my head, – You will come, you will take me, You will carry me to our bed.</p> <p>Toiling hard, I will grow old Even before my old age comes. Good! If only God decrees, Within the year, may a child come.</p> <p>Singing, I will rock to sleep My child together with my tears ... And, growing ever grayer, grayer, In pain I'll rock for years.</p>
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9 Ibid. All translations in this article are by the author, unless otherwise noted.

3

אוי ווי ס'פלאַמט מיין אויער –  
 ס'טרייבט רכילות ווער.  
 איך באַדויער גאַרנישט,  
 דאָך ווערט אַפֿט מאָל שווער.

Oh, how my ears are burning –  
 With gossip and with lies.  
 I regret nothing,  
 How burdensome is life.

נאָר אַ טרייסט געוועזן  
 וואָלט מיר אין מיין פיין,  
 ס'קינד, וואָס דאַרף באַלד קומען,  
 זאָל אַ מיידל זיין.

But one consolation  
 Would ease the hurt in me:  
 The child soon to come  
 A girl must be.

ווערט זי עלטער, זאָג איך  
 אַלעס איר אַליין. –  
 ס'משפט ניט אַ טאַכטער,  
 זי וועט מיר פֿאַרשטיין.

When she grows older, I will  
 Tell her everything. –  
 A daughter will not judge me,  
 She will understand.

4

ניין, איך גלויב ניט, כאַטש דו שווערסט זיך:  
 ליבסט מיר מער שוין ניט אַצינד, –  
 טראָג איך נישט דורך פינגען שווערע  
 אין מיין האַרצן איצט דיין קינד?

No! You swear, I won't believe  
 That you don't love me now, –  
 Don't I bear with pain and grief,  
 Your child now in my heart?

אַלע טאָג ביי גאָט נאָר בעט איך:  
 ס'קינד זאָל ענלעך זיין צו דיר;  
 גלעטנדיק דאָס קינד מיט ליבע,  
 וועסט נישט טראַכטן דען פֿון מיר?

Every day, I pray to God:  
 May the child look like you;  
 Caressing this child with love  
 Wouldn't you, then, think of me?

מעגן ימען דיר פֿאַרטראַגן,  
 מעג אונדז שידדן שטאַט צי לאַנד –  
 אייביק האַלט אונדז פֿעסט צוזאַמען  
 עפעס אַ געהיימע האַנט.

Oceans may carry you away,  
 Cities divide us, and vast lands –  
 Always holding us together  
 Will be this secret hand.<sup>10</sup>

In Landau's "Girl Songs," a girl speaks to her absent lover. As the clock hands move from seven, to eight, to nine, the girl waits vainly for his return and reveals that he has seduced and deserted her, leaving her pregnant. In his absence, she hopes that the child will be a girl, who, as a fellow female, will never judge her for having been seduced outside of marriage. As work and worry age her, the narrator prays that the unborn child will look like her lover and thus, somehow, cause him to think of her. In the end, she asserts that even though he has fled far away and

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

will not return, the "secret hand" of their illegitimate child binds the lover to her.<sup>11</sup>

Landau's poem presents a man's fantasy of how a young woman might respond to her seduction, pregnancy, abandonment, and subsequent ostracism by society. Expressing her longing and desire for the absent lover, the girl extends the powerful hand of her powerlessness and grasps the man with the onerous fact of their illegitimate child. She reaches beyond her solitude to manipulate the man into recognizing his connection to her through the child. Giving voice to the victimized, passive woman, Landau's poem nonetheless focuses on the predatory man, even though this character remains completely off-stage. Rather than judge, condemn, or question this man's actions and motives, the poems valorizes him. The key words, repeated throughout the poem – "פּיין", "האַרץ", "טרויער", "ליבע", "שווער" – signal the conventional vision of the pining maiden. The girl's voice is so annoyingly guilt-inducing that the reader sympathizes and identifies with the man who has abandoned her.

Landau's "Girl Songs," depicting a young woman as passive, longing, victimized, and, above all, sexual, seem to set the tone for the unstated assumptions about the poems by women published in שריפטן seven years later. There is no explicit discussion in שריפטן of the significance of publishing women poets. Yet the fact that women writers were absent from the journal, despite their presence in the Yunge circles, and Landau's single, ersatz representation of a female persona who composes "songs," suggest that these richly creative modernist writers held unexamined notions about what women might write. Such expectations are not what six actual women poets delivered when their work was published in שריפטן beginning in 1919.

No poems or any other writings by women appeared in שריפטן between 1912 and 1914. The editors suspended publication of שריפטן from 1915 through 1918. When they resumed, in the summer of 1919, they included a poem by a woman I had never heard of – Eda Glazer, a poet who subsequently published a number of books. The fall issue of 1919 included one more poem by Eda Glazer, and one each by Roshelle Weprinsky, Celia Dropkin, Esther Pevzner, and Berta Kling. The spring 1921 issue included one poem by Roshelle Weprinsky. Publication again ceased from 1922–1925. In the final issue of שריפטן, winter 1925–1926, the editors included two poems by Roshelle Weprinsky and one by

<sup>11</sup> An alternate reading, offered by Roland Gruschka and Simon Neuberger, would emphasize the girl's conventionality, in that she desires to become pregnant in order to force her lover to marry her, so that she would not have to bear the stigma of having lost her virginity.

Malka Lee. Despite Reuven Iceland's praise for Fradl Shtok in his 1912 article, none of her poems ever appeared in שריפטן, although her sonnet sequence was published in a rival miscellany, די נייע היים, in 1914.

At this time, women writers were a notable presence in the New York Yiddish press, both in print and as a topic of discourse. For example, Anna Margolin published a weekly column on women's topics, "In der froyen velt," in דער טאָג, starting in 1914,<sup>12</sup> and Aron Glanz, later a founder of Introspectivism, wrote an article in the New York newspaper די פֿרײַע אַרבעטער־שטימע (The Free Worker's Voice), called קולטור און די פֿרוי (Culture and Woman), on October 30, 1915. Despite this visibility, the inclusion of women writers seems more an afterthought than a priority of שריפטן, which featured novels by Dovid Ignatov and Joseph Opatoshu, translations into Yiddish of Walt Whitman, as well as of poems by classical Greek, Chinese, and Indian writers; *poemes* many pages long by Mani Leyb, Zishe Landau, Reuven Iceland, and Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, and essays by Khayim Zhitlovski and others. Yet the eleven poems by women that שריפטן published over the years reveal a quiet rebellion against the premises of Landau's "Girl Songs." In contrast to Landau's pastiche of an abandoned, impregnated girl, these poems by women authors express how the imaginative act of writing can offer alternative responses to gender-tinged social and sexual dilemmas.

In the first of these eleven poems, אַ שטילער שטראָם (A Quiet Stream Flows), in the first issue of שריפטן to be revived after World War I, in the summer 1919, Eda Glazer writes:<sup>13</sup>

<p>פֿליסט אַ שטילער שטראָם אין טיפֿעניש פֿון מיין האַרץ. וואָס מאַכט מיר אויס צי גרוי עס איז דער טאָג צי קלאָר? פֿילפֿאַרביק ווי דער טורמאַלין אין העלן שיין פֿון זון רוישט און לויפֿט אַזוי דער שטראָם זיך טאָג נאָך טאָג און יאָר נאָך יאָר.</p>	<p>A quiet stream flows in the deeps of my heart. What does it matter to me if the day is gray or clear? Many-colored as tourmaline in the bright light of the sun The stream rushes and races, day after day, year after year.</p>
<p>ווילדע בלומען, ווילדע גראָזן וואַקסן אויף זיין ברעג. אין די ווילדע גראָזן הילט מיין האַרץ זיך איין, און מיין גרויע ווירקלעכקייט שפיגלט זיך אין שטראָם, שפילט זיך מיטן וואַסערשום אין רעגנבויגן־שיין.</p>	<p>Wildflowers and wild grasses grow on its banks. In the wild grasses, my heart heals. And my gray reality, reflected in the stream, Plays with the waters' foam in the rainbow's shine.</p>

<sup>12</sup> Swartz 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Glazer 1919a: 6.

In Glazer's lyric, the speaker reflects upon herself as a sentient being. The character, apparently alone in a landscape, describes the natural beauty that surrounds her. But a closer look reveals that this is an internal landscape, for the stream "flows in the deeps of my heart." The environment of the jewel-hued stream and wildflowers and wild grasses is a metaphor by which the speaker's imagination transforms her "gray reality." Although the imagery of Glazer's poem is conventional, it reads with a concreteness and immediacy when contrasted to the poem's only abstraction, "ווירקלעכקייט" (reality).

In contrast to Landau's "Girl Songs," which characterize the female speaker only in terms of her relationship to her absent lover and unborn daughter, Glazer's poem foregrounds a woman outside of the network of sexual and social relationships. Portraying a girl who longs for but can never achieve the traditional roles of marriage and childbearing because she has allowed herself to be seduced, impregnated, and abandoned, Landau's poem limits her vision to longing for her seducer and her child. In contrast, Eda Glazer's first שריפֿטן poem presents a woman speaker who transcends the confinement and monotony of her life through her solitary making of metaphors, which is the work of the poet.<sup>14</sup>

The fall 1919 issue of שריפֿטן presents a group of five poems by women in a section called איינציקע לידער (Individual Poems). This section of poems by women is preceded by a group of erotic drawings by Y. Topf, illustrating the New Testament narrative of Salome, as she dances nude and bears the severed head of John the Baptist on a platter. Salome was an object of fascination for immigrant Jewish writers and artists, testing the limits of cultural tradition to draw metaphors from the Christian Bible, as in Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's 1919 Yiddish love poem "Salome," Anzia Yeziarska's 1923 English-language novel *Salome of the Tenements*, Yiddish poet Fradl Shtok's 1914 untitled sonnet on the subject, and Celia Dropkin's famous poem די צירקוס־דאָמע (The Circus Lady).<sup>15</sup> By prefacing, as it were, the section of five women poets with Y. Topf's provocative drawings, the editors of the fall 1919 שריפֿטן titillate the reader and, perhaps unconsciously, raise expectations and anxieties that the poems by women that follow will be as transgressive and sexual as the erotic

14 Eda Glazer, now all but forgotten, went on to publish at least four books, including a volume of her poetry and three books for children, in New York, between 1922 and 1940 (Glazer 1922, 1929a, 1929b and 1940).

15 See Halpern 1919: 149–151; Shtok 1914: 7 in the sixth section; Shtok 1928: 98; Yeziarska 1923; Hoberman 1991: 105f. The interest in Salome among Yiddish writers may have been roused by a performance in Yiddish of Oscar Wilde's 1894 play *Salome*, although I have not been able to document such a performance. In 1909 a Yiddish translation by A. Frumkin of Wilde's play was published in London.

dance of the temptress in the Christian legend. Moreover, the nude images draw lascivious attention to the female body, versions of which were presumably possessed by the women poets.<sup>16</sup> These illustrations exemplify both the daring of Yiddish modernism and a Jewish male ambivalence toward that daring in the appropriation of Christian themes and the exposure of female sexuality.

The first of the group of “Individual Poems,” Roshelle Weprinsky’s “From My Slender Limbs” (פֿון מײַנע שלאַנקע גלידער), focuses on a woman’s sexual body in a way that undoes the objectification in Topf’s illustrations. Moreover, Weprinsky’s poem offers what seems like a response to the illicit pregnancy of Landau’s girl narrator in “Girl Songs” seven years earlier. Unlike Landau’s deserted mother, who invokes his child to manipulate her lover into returning to her, the speaker of Weprinsky’s poem mourns the children she refuses to bear, who “weep” “from my slender limbs” and who “want to discover the world through my flesh.” This woman resists the pressure of the maternal urge to bring these unborn children to life. Instead, she admits:<sup>17</sup>

נאַר טיף אין זיך פֿאַרטויב איך	But deep inside, I silence
יענע צאַרטע שטימעלעך;	Those gentle little voices
מיט טויזנט שטימען פֿון אַ פֿיבערישן דראַנג,	With a thousand voices of feverish struggle
צו זײַן ווי איצטער, אייביק אַזוי בויגזאַם, אַזוי שלאַנק	To be forever as I am now, so lithe, so slender
און פֿרײַ פֿאַר מײַן קאַפּריז,	And free for my caprice,
פֿאַר נעכט געשטערנטע,	For starry nights,
און פֿאַר דײַנע צערטלענדיקע הענט –	And for your fondling hands –

With the phrases קאַפּריז and דײַנע צערטלענדיקע הענט (“my caprice” and “your fondling hands”), the speaker silences the cries of the unborn babies. Choosing sexual pleasure over the maternal urge in the middle of the poem, this speaker seems to embrace the modern ideas of free love and to put aside the conventional woman’s role of childbearing. The poem, however, suddenly reverses itself, as the speaker contemplates the danger of that choice and addresses her unborn children (in the plural, איר), rather than her lover (in the singular, דו):

<sup>16</sup> Fradl Shtok was the only woman poet, besides Celia Dropkin, included by Zishe Landau in the 1919 anthology of Yiddish poetry in America, a fact that confirms the limited place women modernists were given by their male contemporaries. The anthology included Dropkin’s poem, מיין ווייסע שניי־פרינצעסין, 51f, and Shtok’s, דו טראַגסט דאָס האַרץ, 172. Landau 1919: 51f and 172.

<sup>17</sup> Weprinsky 1919: 17.

<p>זאלן מיינע טעג כאָטש ווערן האַסטיקער פֿאַרשווענדט,  אָ דאָרטן וווּ איר וואָרט –  איר וויינענדיקע אייגעלעך אונטער די ווייסע טויערן  קומען זאָל איך יונג צו אייך,  איך וועל אייך שטיל צוזאַמענגעמען,  אונטער מיינע ווייסע פֿליגלעך,  און אויף עפעס טרויערן  און וויינען שטיל מיט אייך.</p>	<p>Although my days may be more  swiftly squandered  When to where you wait –  Your weeping little eyes beyond the white gate, –  Still young, I shall come to you.  Quietly, I will gather you  Under my white wings  And grieve about something  And weep quietly with you.</p>
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Shifting her address in this stanza from the “דו” of the lover to the “איר” of the unborn children, the speaker contemplates the possibility that, if she were to die “still young,” “more swiftly,” perhaps because of the excesses of the sexual pleasure she pursues, she would join her unborn children and, like an angel or the Shekhinah, take them under her “white wings.” Together they would “grieve about something” (אויף עפעס טרויערן) – the “עפעס” (something) being the fact that she chose not to bear them. With its circular structure – beginning and ending with the unborn children that pivot around the lovers – and the incantatory repetition of “אויגן,” “וויינען,” “שטים,” the poem emphasizes that the woman speaker has chosen not to bear these children. This allusion to the emotional cost of such a choice for this speaker, whether made through the practice of birth control or of abortion, places her in a vise of conflicting feelings that form a contrast to the sentimentality of Landau’s narrator. Having rejected the traditional role of childbearing, Weprinsky’s speaker longs for what she has renounced – children – and regrets the consequences of the modern choice she made in favor of sexual pleasure.

The third poem in the fall 1919 issue of שריפֿטן אין העמאַק, שריפֿטן (In the Hammock) by Celia Dropkin, opens by evoking an image of language and resolves it by returning to sexual love:<sup>18</sup>

<p>איך ליג אין העמאַק  דורך צווייגן שיינט הייס אַרײַן די זון,  איך פֿאַרמאַך מיינע אויגן  און זע אַ בלויע כינעזישע שריפֿט  אויף אַ גאָלדענעם בלאַט.  ליכטיק בלויע כינעזישע אותיות  פֿינקלען אַרויף און אַראָפּ,  ווי קליינע פֿאַנטאַסטישע פֿענצטער,</p>	<p>I lie in the hammock  The sun shines in hot through branches,  I close my eyes  And see a blue Chinese script  On a golden page.  Radiant blue Chinese characters  Sparkle above and below,  Like small, fantastic windows</p>
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18 Dropkin 1919: 18.

אויף אַ וואַנט פֿון אַ גאָלדענעם טורעם.	In the wall of a golden tower.
איך פֿאַרשטיי נישט די שריפֿט	I do not understand the script
נאָר עפעס פֿאַרדריקט מיין האַרץ.	But something presses upon my heart,
איך דערמאָן זיך:	I remember:
„איך ליב דיך, איך ליב דיך“	“I love you, I love you”
אַזוי לעז איך די בלויע	This is how I read the blue
כינעזישע שריפֿט.	Chinese script.

In a hammock, under a tree, the speaker describes the patterns of the branches and the sun that remain on the insides of her eyelids when she closes her eyes. Like Eda Glazer's persona, who described the flowing stream in her imagination with the unexpected metaphor of the gemstone tourmaline, Dropkin's speaker transforms what she has seen in nature into the unexpected figure of Chinese characters written in "bright blue" "on a golden page." As the poem progresses, the image of this writing develops from an inscrutable message into sparkling "fantastic windows/ In the wall of a golden tower." The juxtaposition of the indecipherable script and the phallic tower with its portals for seeing in or out leads the speaker to feel "something press[ ... ] upon [ her ] heart" and to remember and repeat the words, "איך ליב דיך," (I love you). The memory of these words makes comprehensible to the speaker the enticing foreignness of nature's writing, or "Chinese script." Now she can "read" it.

That Dropkin calls this visionary writing "Chinese" emerges in part from the modernist interest in actual Chinese culture and literature prevalent at the time, an interest that extended into Yiddish when, in 1925–1926, an issue of שריפֿטן presented Meyer Shtiker's Yiddish translations of classical Chinese poetry.<sup>19</sup> Whatever Chinese texts or art Dropkin may have seen, in fact her image of blue Chinese characters on a gold page reverses the actual inscribed panels that hang in Buddhist and Confucian temples. In Dropkin's poem, it is the inscrutability of the Chinese pictograms that emphasizes the act of the imagination.

Dropkin's strange, beautiful poem traces the work of the imagination through a process of vision. The external image of nature's beauty becomes the projection of that image into the woman's body, the insides of her closed eyelids. This transformation, from nature to the woman's body to an indecipherable language to an architectural structure, presses upon the woman's "heart." With this mention of the heart, the poem returns to the woman's body. Such physicality brings forth memory; memory brings to the surface words of love; and such words

19 I have written at length about Meyer Shtiker's Yiddish translations of Chinese poetry in Hellerstein forthcoming.



allow the woman to interpret the script that she could not read before. The speaker’s inability to interpret the visual symbols of the outside world leads to a memory of a key emotional and erotic experience. It is only this memory that enables her to decipher the “script” she reads. By making sensual memory the means by which a woman can interpret an inscrutable text, Dropkin depicts the interdependence between nature, art, culture, and eros in a woman poet’s creative process.

There is a crucial difference between the women narrators in Glazer’s, Weprinsky’s, and Dropkin’s poems and Landau’s girl. Because Landau’s persona is preoccupied with the conventional female gender roles, the poems objectify the girl who sings them. In contrast, the female personae in the three poems by Glazer, Weprinsky, and Dropkin engage actively in making a poetry that lifts them out of those conventions. Landau has romanticized the illegitimate mother, who is also a version of the *agune* or abandoned wife, by making her disempowerment the occasion for her songs. In contrast, Glazer’s speaker comes across as primarily a poet engaged in an act of the imagination that transforms her perception of her life. And Weprinsky and Dropkin give each female speaker agency through her sexuality, which is bound up in the imagery of writing. For Landau, the songs of a girl emerge from the social and religious castigation of transgressive sexual behavior: she is punished by becoming both an abandoned wife (עגונה) and the mother of an illegitimate child (ממזר). Glazer prioritizes the woman’s imagination, while Weprinsky exposes the emotional consequences of the speaker’s rebellion against the norms of women’s sexual roles in Jewish law by choosing to engage in sex for its own pleasure and refusing to procreate. Dropkin celebrates that same pleasure-driven sexuality by expressing it through metaphors of writing.

The angry persona in Eda Glazer’s דער לעצטער קלאנג (The Last Sound), further challenges Landau’s stereotype of passive women. In this fourth poem by a woman in the fall 1919 שרייבטן, and Glazer’s second to appear in that journal, Glazer depicts a woman’s resistance to a lover’s violence as an act of strength:<sup>20</sup>

פֿון איין זייט טיר שטייסטו אָצינד	Now you’re standing at the door
און הערסט נישט אויף צו קלינגען.	And won’t stop ringing.
פֿון ווייטיק בייס איך זיך די הענט	In pain, I bite my hand
און דריי זיך אויף אין רינגען.	And go crazy with the clanging.

20 Glazer 1919b: 19.

עס רייסן זיך די פֿיס צום טיר – אין שטול בלייב איך דאָך זיצן, און הער צונויפֿגעדרייטערהייט ווי מיינע ציינער קריצן.	My feet pull me to the door – On the chair, I remain sitting And hear how insanely My teeth are grinding.
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דער לעצטער קלאַנג פֿון דיינע טריט אין שטילקייט ווערט פֿאַרשלונגען, און אין דער שטילקייט ווער איך אויך, ווי דיינע טריט פֿאַרוונקען.	The last sound of your footsteps Is swallowed by silence, And, like your footsteps, I sink into the silence.
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עס וועט זיך קיין מאָל מער מיין טיר ניט עפֿענען פֿאַר דיר...	Rest assured, for you, my door Will open nevermore.
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Unlike Landau's anxious girl, who "keeps looking at the clock" for her absent lover, Glazer's speaker struggles to resist her lover's arrival by sitting in silence, rage, and ambivalent desire behind the closed door. When he finally leaves, she is relieved. Glazer conveys this scene through the imagery of sound and silence, as heard by the narrator through the door she has locked against the intruder. Subjected to the lover's presence on the other side of the door, the speaker sits passively. Although tempted to open to him again and trying *not* to respond verbally, she becomes so "crazed" that she bites her own hand and grinds her teeth. As long as the lover is standing outside the door, the speaker cannot articulate her own response. Tension reverberates in the third stanza, as silence swallows the last sound of the man's departing footsteps. Momentarily, the speaker remains suspended in a stillness that seems to have defeated her. Likening herself to the man's now-vanished footsteps, the speaker, too, seems to have disappeared. But the final couplet reverses that impression, as the speaker defiantly declares her decision that, should the lover return, she will never allow him to enter. Unlike Landau's abandoned girl, Glazer's speaker welcomes the silence that results from her lover's departure, because in this silence, she finds her voice.

The link between poetry and a woman's sexuality recurs in Esther Pevzner's *די שליסל מיינע* (My Keys) and again challenges the portrayal of the victimized woman in Landau's *געזאַנגען*. Pevzner's poem expresses the conundrum of an isolated modern self, unable to speak to or be heard by another person, and a woman trapped by her inhibitions, which are at once both sexual and verbal. This woman addresses

a remote lover and links a sexual letting-go with the futile hope that she will communicate with the reader of her poem. Locked within the doors of the house of her self, this speaker longs to give the keys to another, but cannot communicate that longing. Although she says that she wants to be more than "a mark in the air,/ A gesture that seeks a purpose," she cannot tell her would-be savior how to reach her, much less that she wants to be freed, because he exists only in "the land of my secrets," her imagination and her poem. The only way that Pevzner's speaker can articulate her stymied love to herself is by writing a poem that will act as a key to unlock her solipsism. In contrast to Landau's "girl," who attempts with her unborn daughter to manipulate the man who has left her, Pevzner's speaker is both more hopeless and more empowered, for she lives fully in the imagination. Although writing poetry will not solve her problems in the world, with it she creates an interiority that, it is implied, will somehow save her.

In the last of the fall 1919 poems, Berta Kling's minimalist טעג געגארטע (Days Desired), an aging woman mourns the passing of empty days:<sup>21</sup>

טעג געגארטע,	Days desired,
טעג גענארטע,	Deceptive days,
טעג איר בלויע,	You blue days,
טעג איר גרויע,	You gray days,
אייער גיין,	Your goings,
אייער קומען	Your comings
האָט ביַיַ מיר וואָס	Always took a little
שטענדיק צוגענומען.	Out of me.
טעג באַשטראַלטע,	Dazzling days,
טעג איר קאַלטע,	You cold days,
טעג באַשיינטע,	Days of beauty,
טעג באַוויינטע,	Days of crying
מיר געלאָזן	To me, you have
האָט איר נאָר	Left only
פֿעדעם זילבער	Silver threads,
גרויע האָר.	Gray hair.

The speaker in Kling's poem considers the consequences of time's passing. She tells of days that she longs for, days that deceived her and were nonetheless blue and gray, filled with comings and goings, dazzling, beautiful, and sad. Dynamic in their oppositions, these days have

21 Kling 1919: 21.

left the speaker in her late years with, it seems, nothing but gray hair. By calling that gray hair זילבער פֿעדערס (silver threads), however, the speaker implies that beauty glimmers within her years. While it echoes the girl's anxiety about aging expressed in Landau's געזאָנגען, Kling's poem disciplines the cliché by addressing not a lover but time itself. The experimental verse form that Kling introduces in this poem (and develops in the several books she published in the 1930s)<sup>22</sup> conveys emotion through repetition in a stringently restrained catalogue of irregularly rhymed two-beat verse lines. Like the poems by Glazer and Pevzner, Kling's טעג געגאָרטע establishes an environment of the imagination and words for the woman speaker to inhabit.

Women poets appeared again in שרייבטן 4, in the spring of 1921. Two poems by Roshelle Weprinsky, ווען... (If...) and כוואַליעס (Waves), also turn convention into something new:<sup>23</sup>

<p>ווען איך זאל קינדערלעך געבוירן יעדן יאָר אַ קינד ביז איך וועל האָבן צען, ווי ווינדערלעך דאָס וואָלט געווען. איך וואָלט זיי דורך די טעג געזויגן און געוויגט, און אין די אַוונטן וואָלט איך ביים געלן ליכט ביז שפעט לייבעלעך פֿון וואָל פֿאַר זיי געשטריקט, העמדעלעך און ווינדעלעך וואָלט איך פֿאַר זיי געוואָשן, פֿאַר טאָג ווען אַלע שלאָפֿן וואָלט איך צעהאַנגען אויף די שטריק, און וואָלט אַ ווייליקע געשטאַנען, געקוקט אין גרויסן בלויזען הימל אויב ס'וועט היינט רעגענען, און ס'וואָלט מיין האַרץ באַהאַלטן אָנגעקוואַלן פֿון דעם שירך, שאַרך, שירך, וואָס דער ווינט מאַכט טרייבנדיק די שטריק היין און הער, היין און הער אויפֿבלאַזנדיק בייכלעך אין די העמדעלעך און ווינדעלעך, ווי די פֿאַנען פֿון אַ זעגלשיף. די פֿאַנען פֿון מיין זעגלשיף, ווי ווינדערלעך דאָס וואָלט געווען.</p>	<p>If I had borne little children, A child every year, until I had ten, How wonderful that would have been. I would nurse them and rock them through the days, And late into the evenings by the yellow light, I would Knit them little jackets, Little shirts and little diapers I would wash for them. At dawn, when all were sleeping I would hang clothes on the line, And would stand there a while, Looking into the great blue sky To see if it would rain today, And my heart would Hide, swollen with the <i>shirkh, shorkh, shirkh</i> That the wind makes Driving the line Back and forth, back and forth Blowing out little bellies in the shirts and diapers, Like the flags of a sailing ship. The flags of my sailing ship, How wonderful that would have been.</p>
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<sup>22</sup> Kling 1935, 1939 and 1952.

<sup>23</sup> Weprinsky 1921: 11.

In ...ווען, Weprinsky develops the tension between sexual freedom and motherhood for the modern woman, expressed in her 1919 poem, פֿון מיניע שלאַנקע גלידער. Weprinsky depicts a woman’s sense of loss as she imagines an unexpected adventure arising in the domestic task of hanging up the laundry of her ten children, none of them actually born. The speaker tells how, performing such a mundane task, she would find the time to contemplate her future as she stood outdoors by the clothesline and gazed into the blue sky. Should a breeze pick up, it would bring the little shirts and diapers to life, filling them out like the “little bellies” that never came into being. The image of baby clothes animated by the wind leads to an even more powerful image of promise and hope – the sails of “my sailing ship,” which would transport the speaker toward the possibility of realizing miraculous things that might have been. The poem begins in the subjunctive mood and moves quickly into the future tense and then to the conditional voice:

ווען איך זאָל קינדערלעך געבוירן  
יעדן יאָר אַ קינד ביז איך וועל האָבן צען,  
ווי ווונדערלעך דאָס וואָלט געווען. (lines 1–3)

The poem’s concluding line 21 poignantly repeats the third line: “How wonderful that would have been.”<sup>24</sup> With this deliberate, subtle shift and repetition, Weprinsky establishes the distance between what is and what cannot be. The grammar itself is the means through which the speaker must both confront her regret at not bearing children and imagine how she would attend to them if she had. Significantly, this fantasy of motherhood depicts the interaction between mother and children in a single line: “I would nurse them and rock them through the days” (4). The rest of the poem describes the activities the narrator would engage in while her children were sleeping: knitting, sewing, and washing the babies’ clothing (5–7). The remaining two-thirds of the poem evokes the mother hanging the laundered baby clothes out to dry at dawn. In this solitary act, the wind brings her unborn children momentarily to life and then becomes the means for the woman’s escape (8–18). The grammatical features of verb mood and tense produce the act of the imagination that lets the image of clothing evolve into the image of a ship’s sail. This metaphorical sailing ship would allow the speaker to escape both from the traditional decree that a married woman must produce children, and from the law that labels an unmarried woman having sex as an adulteress whose children will be ממזרים

24 This line could also be translated as “How wonderful that would be.”

(illegitimate and excluded from the Jewish community). This conundrum reflects Weprinsky's own life-long extramarital relationship with the married poet Mani Leyb. It also helps to demonstrate how for the women published in שריפטן, the language of poetry becomes the locus for the possibility of the impossible and the means for the articulation of what otherwise remains unspeakable.

The tension between muteness and expression recurs in Weprinsky's כוואליעס (Waves), also in שריפטן 4:<sup>25</sup>

כוואליעס וואָס דו האָסט אויפגעברויזט אין מיין האַרץ, שלאָגן זיך אָן אָן די ברעגן פֿון מיינע ליפּן, ווי עס שלאָגט זיך אָן דער ים אין זיינע ברעגן און בלייבט אַלץ שטום. נאָר מיינע אויגן בלייבן ניט שטום, זיי בלייבן ניט שטום מיינע ניט פֿאַרדעקטע אויגן און איך באַהאַלט זיי ניט פֿאַר דיר.	Waves you have stirred up in my heart, Beating against the shores of my lips, Like the sea that beats against its shores And remains always mute. But my eyes do not remain mute, They do not remain mute, my uncovered eyes And I do not conceal them before you.
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In this poem, Weprinsky develops an analogy between the ocean and a speaker who hears the ocean's waves. Comparing herself to the roiling yet mute ocean waves, the speaker claims that she cannot utter her own turbulent heart. But unlike the waves, she can speak to her lover with her eyes. As in Glazer's and Pevzner's poems in earlier issues of שריפטן, Weprinsky's כוואליעס creates a place where otherwise thwarted expression is possible.

The final issue of שריפטן (Winter 1925/1926) includes two more poems by Weprinsky and one by Malka Lee. Weprinsky's poems, דיין מידער קאָפּ (Your Tired Head) and פֿרילינג (Spring), are sensuous love poems. The first compares a lover's breath on a woman's neck to a spill of rose petals:<sup>26</sup>

דיין מידער קאָפּ הענגט אויף מיין נאָקן ווי אַ פֿאַרחלשטע רוז; איך פֿיל ניט איר געוויכט, איך פֿיל בלויז דעם אַטעם וואָס קינקלט זיך פֿון דיין מויל ווי ווייסע, ווייכע רויזנבליטלעך און שיטן זיך פֿונאַנדער איבער מיין קלייד.	Your tired head leans on the nape of my neck Like a fainting rose; I do not feel its weight, I feel only the breath That rolls from your mouth Like soft, white rose-petals And spills Over my dress.
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<sup>25</sup> Weprinsky 1921: 11.

<sup>26</sup> Weprinsky 1925–1926a: 13.

In an exquisite simile, the speaker depicts the sensation of her lover’s close physical presence in terms of a rose that falls apart. The lassitude of his tired head, figured as the “fainting rose,” emphasizes the approaching pleasure. As the man breathes upon the woman’s dress, the figurative flower disintegrates, and the soft touch of its petals heightens the expectation. Weprinsky breathes new life into the rose, a convention of European love poetry wherein typically it is a man who compares his beloved woman to a rose. Weprinsky reverses the gender roles and particularizes the moment to achieve a stunningly understated erotic effect.

In contrast, the second of Weprinsky’s poems in שריפֿטן פֿרילינג, 1925/1926 depicts the revitalization of the speaker through love:<sup>27</sup>

דער בלו־לייכטנדיקער פֿרילינג־רעגן, בייטשט אויף מיט בייסנדיקע בייטשן די אָלטע ערד צום לעבן. דיינע בלויע בליקן בייטשן אויף מיין מיד געוואָרן בלוט, דיינע בלויע בליקן רעגענען פֿרילינג אויף מיין געבוִיגענעם רוקן; און איך גלייך זיך אויס – איך גלייך זיך צו דיר. אויף מיינע ליפן בליט דער שמייכל פֿון רייפֿקייט קלוג און מיינע הענט – מיינע ווייסע אויסגעשריייען אין זיי איז ווידער דאָ דער כוח און דער פֿלאַטער פֿון זעגלען.	The shining-blue spring rain, Whips the old earth Back to life with biting whips. Your blue gazes Whip my exhausted blood, Your blue gazes Rain down spring onto my bent back; And I stand up straight – I straighten up to you. The smile of ripeness blossoms Wisely on my lips, And in the white exclamations of my hands There is again the strength and the fluttering of sails.
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In this poem, again, Weprinsky takes a conventional poetic figure, the coming of spring, and makes it new, this time through an extended metaphor rather than a simile. Comparing the lover’s blue gaze to the “shining-blue spring rain” that “whips the old earth / back to life with biting whips,” the speaker tells how he makes her “stand up straight” like a seedling and renews the strength of her “white hands.” In these two love poems, Weprinsky demonstrates her knowledge of old poetic conventions and her skill at making them new, in the modernist manner. The cumulative strengths of Weprinsky’s poems in שריפֿטן, which incorporate multiple aspects of sexuality into a variety of poetic forms and styles, outshine the male-composed “girl songs” at the start of the publication.

27 Weprinsky 1925–1926b: 13.

In contrast to Weprinsky's depictions of pleasurable sex, Malka Lee, in קויפֿט פּאַפּיראַסן (Buy Cigarettes!), echoes the meter and tone of Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's famous דער גאַסן־פּוּיקער (The Street Drummer), to narrate the disturbing story of a very young girl selling cigarettes on the street who is accosted by a Cossack:<sup>28</sup>

פּאַפּיראַסן! פּאַפּיראַסן! קלינגט מיין שטים דורך גאַסן, מיט אויגן נעפלדיק פּאַרצויגן – קויפֿט! קויפֿט! קויפֿט! יאָגן פּוקסן זיך – קאַזאַקן – מיט פּאַדקאַוועס ווי די קאַטעס – שניידן קלאַנגען אַזוי ווי זאַנגען: קויפֿט! קויפֿט! פּאַפּיראַסן!	Cigarettes! Cigarettes! My voice rings through the streets With eyes overcast, cloudy – Buy! Buy! Buy! Hunting foxes – Cossacks ride – With horseshoes like scythes – And cut down sounds like sheaves: Buy! Buy! Cigarettes!
טאַנצט קאַזאַק מיט פֿערד אין ראָד, שפּרינג איך צו אין קאַראַהאַד, גלעט די פֿעל מיט פּחד שטילן, ווי איך גלעט מיין זיידנס תּפּילין – מייע אויגן בעטן, בעטן – קויפֿט! קויפֿט! סיגאַרעטן!	Cossack and horse dance in a circle, So I jump into the whirl, Stroke the horsehide with quiet fear, The way I stroke my grandfather's tefillin – My eyes beg, beg – Buy! Buy! Cigarettes!

While Halpern's street drummer is a figure for the Yiddish male immigrant poet – wild, passionate, fearless, impoverished, on the street – he possesses the power of voice and instrument to respond to adversity – “*dzhin dzhin bum bum bum*.” In contrast, Malka Lee's girl cigarette vendor, while also impoverished, stands on the Galician street, where she is objectified sexually and violently by a Cossack. She gives in to the mute appeal of his horse and strokes it the way that she once caressed her grandfather's tefillin. The Cossack's gaze transforms the girl into a reverse Salome, and forces her into an erotic dance that disempowers her:

קומט קאַזאַק מיט לייבן־אויגן, בריט מיין קערפּער ווי מיט שפּיזן – שאַרפֿט מיט מעסערס דורך מיין לייב – דורך מיין צוגעדעקטן קלייד שלינגט ער, שלינגט ער – נאַקעטקייט... שיילט אַרונטער מיט דער הויט – גלידער פּלאַמען, גלידער רויט. מענטשן – גאַסן – קאַראַהאַד –	Then comes a Cossack with lion-eyes, Scalds my body as with spears – Pierces through my flesh with knives – Through the dress that covers me He gulps, he gulps – nakedness... Peels off my skin – Limbs flaming, limbs red. People – streets – in a whirl –
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28 Lee 1925–1926: 16.



און איך נאָקעט – אין אַ ראָד	And I, naked – in a circle
און די אויגן בעטן, בעטן:	And my eyes beg, beg,
קויפֿט! קויפֿט! סיגאַרעטן!	Buy! Buy! Cigarettes!

In the end, the only thing that saves her is the Cossack's declaration: that she is still a child, not a woman, and not yet an appropriate sexual object:

פּראָלט קאַזאַק געלעכטער אויס,	Then the Cossack wrings out laughter,
אַזוי ווי וועש מען פּראָלט	The way that laundry's wrung out
פֿון טייך אַרויס: –	In the river: –
אַך, דו שיינע קליינינקע!	Ach, you pretty little thing
דו ביסט אַזאַ קליינינקע!!!	You are still such a little thing!!

He ogles her "with lion-eyes" and "pierces through my flesh with knives –/ through the dress that covers me/ he gulps, he gulps – nakedness" until she whirls, "naked – in a circle," still attempting to sell the cigarettes she needs to unload in order to make a living. Although it is not clear whether the Cossack actually strips and rapes her, or if she is "only" terrorized by his sexual gaze, the poem is shot through with the vulnerability of a Jewish girl who has no choice but to peddle her cigarettes in order to survive. By transforming her sexual victimization into a brazen modern street song, this girl survives.

The editors of שריפֿטן included eleven poems by six women in the last eight years of its fourteen-year publication life-span. Following the initial example of the ersatz female narrator in Zishe Landau's מיידלשע געזאַנגען, the poems by actual women treated the topic of a modern sexuality that deviated from traditional attitudes toward marriage and childbearing. However, in contrast to the pathos of the impregnated girl in Landau's sequence, the narrators in the poems by Eda Glazer, Roshelle Weprinsky, Celia Dropkin, Esther Pevzner, Berta Kling, and Malka Lee throw off the contemporary clichés of women's passivity and victimization to find power in the linking of their sexuality and their poetic voices.

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