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THE SCHANDMASKE, SILENCE, AND *MAME-LOSHN*

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The small [Medieval Crime and Justice Museum](#) in Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Germany, holds an unusual [artifact](#), pictured in the photograph above. It is an iron mask, which comprises a feminine face, adorned with a pair of pointed ears, two bulging eyes, and a long, fiendish tongue. Such masks, known in German as [Schandmaske](#) (scold's bridles), were a ubiquitous means of punishing “talkative

women,” “[scolds](#),” or “shrews” during the early modern period. Some masks contained a small iron bit, which was impressed onto the wearer’s tongue, thus physically silencing her.

The troubling image of the Rothenburg *Schandmaske* comes to my mind as I scour through early modern Yiddish, Hebrew, and German texts in search of the voices of Jewish women of the past. Like other scholars interested in premodern Jewish women on the one hand and Yiddish on the other, I am deeply preoccupied with the issue of silence.

But the *Schandmaske* is more than a colorful metaphor for the problem of Jewish women’s literary marginalization. Much more than that, it is powerful testimony to the intense preoccupation in early modern Europe with the problem of women’s speech. Of course, anxieties about women’s unruly speech have been around for centuries, but the late medieval and early modern periods saw an exponential increase in these fears, as the venomous tongues of women became the focus of intense literary, artistic, and even criminal scrutiny. With the rise of print, fear of women’s public speech intensified, and women were, as Wendy Wall explains: “constrained by the norms of acceptable feminine behavior, [and] specifically discouraged from tapping into the newly popular channel of print.”¹ Nonetheless, the early modern period witnessed an explosion of women’s writing, including such widely-read women authors as Francoise de Graffigny, Aphra Behn, and Delarivier Manley.

As scholars of European Jewry are painfully aware, this phenomenon had no real equivalent in the Jewish literary world—texts by early modern Jewish women are few and far between. And yet, the early modern period witnessed the consolidation of Yiddish as a literary language, paving the way for Jewish women’s access to the written word both as readers, and (to a much lesser degree) as authors.² What can be learned from the fact that Jewish literature in the *mame-loshn* (mother tongue) expanded at the very same historical moment in which the feminine tongue was being physically suppressed? How do these two seemingly conflicting but simultaneous phenomena dovetail? Does Yiddish literature offer a counterreaction to the misogyny that characterized the early modern period? Or did it partake in the gender panic of the time, offering yet another means of governing women’s unruly tongues? Was Yiddish literature an outlet for the voices of women, or was it like the iron tongue of the Rothenburg *Schandmaske*, a sinister simulacrum of feminine speech, which rather than signifying its existence, participated in its suppression? Given the scarcity of Jewish women authors during the early modern period, one might expect that fears of the feminine voice would have been less pervasive among Jewish writers. And yet browsing through Jewish literature from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, one is struck by the ubiquity of anecdotes, admonitions, statements, and assertions dedicated to the “problem” of women’s expression. Significantly, such utterances seem to arise with an added urgency in works written in Yiddish and designed specifically for the consumption of women.

¹ Wendy Wall, *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY, 1993), 208.

² On the complexities of the association of Yiddish with women and Hebrew with men, see: Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley, 1997), p. 37-38.

A seventeenth-century Yiddish song (*lid*) from Prague offers a poignant example. The *lid* emphasizes gossip and evil speech as the greatest of all sins, warning: “women must be guided/ they have stemmed from Eve/ who spoke falsely to her man/ and man was expelled/ from the Garden of Eden.”³ A reminiscent though slightly different accusation appears in the *Tsene-rene*, known as the women’s Bible. This time it is not Eve’s conversation with Adam that is the root of all evil, but rather her conversation with the serpent. “The word Eve,” we are informed, means “to talk, [for] she should not have talked so much with the serpent.”⁴ These and other representations of Eve’s speech acts as the *original* original sin offer an indication of just how troubling women’s words were for early modern authors. It seems then, that the very language that granted women authorial agency was used to restrict this same agency, and to discourage its use. Thus, from its earliest utterances, silence was inscribed into the Yiddish language, and the pens of men weighed heavily—like the iron bit of the *Schandmaske*—on the feminine tongue. In my research, I attempt to uncover the ways in which the preoccupation with silence affected early modern Jewish literature, and to trace some women’s reactions to this process. In this manner, I aim to contribute to the collective endeavor of feminist scholars to recover and amplify the hushed voices of women past, bringing them to a roar.

³ Translation: Devra Kay, *Seyder Tkhines: The Forgotten Book of Common Prayer for Jewish Women* (Philadelphia, 2001), 234.

⁴ Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi of Yanow, *Tsene u-rene* (Sulzbach, 1692), 5b. An almost identical accusation is found in Richard Allestree’s, *The Government of the Tongue* (Oxford, 1674), 7. And see discussion in: Lynda E. Boose, “[Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member](#),” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Summer, 1991): 204.