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“An altogether unusual love and understanding”: The Shomer Sisters and the Gender Politics of *Shund* Theatre¹

by Sonia Gollance

Abstract: Rose Shomer Bachelis (1882-1966) and Miriam Shomer Zunser (1883-1951) were prominent cultural figures in their lifetimes, who achieved success as playwrights, yet their dramatic work has been largely forgotten. Identified as “di shvester Shomer” (the Shomer sisters), Bachelis and Zunser represented one half of the younger generation of the most prominent *shund* family. Like their prolific novelist and playwright father Shomer, they knew that “the masses love razzle-dazzle and hocus-pocus,” as Sholem Aleichem claimed of their father in his famous 1888 polemic *Shomers mishpet* (The Judgment of Shomer). The Shomer sisters’ unpublished operetta “Der liebes tants” (The Dance of Love), submitted for American copyright in 1929, depicts the relationship between two sisters who are in love with the same man. Deploying such tropes as show business, wedding festivities, and buffoonish “greenhorns,” the play is designed to entertain. Yet a deeper examination of “Der liebes tants” gives new meaning to *shund*, a genre that has usually been regarded as formulaic and uncritical. While the play’s Apache dance motif conveys the potential violence and ambivalence of heterosexual desire, it can also be read against the grain to question the centrality of these very themes for the text as a whole. The Shomer sisters’ operetta undermines its own marriage plot by emphasizing the devotion of the two sisters. By focusing on sisters—both as writers and as literary characters—we can rethink our understandings of the marriage plot

¹ This article was written during the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when many archives were closed. I am grateful to the following librarians and archivists for their assistance in accessing materials: Sharon Horowitz (Library of Congress), Tal Nadan (New York Public Library), Amanda Miryem-Khaye Seigel (New York Public Library), and Hallel Yadin (YIVO Institute for Jewish Research). Joseph Galron-Goldschlager generously located Rose Shomer Bachelis’s marriage certificates. I would also like to thank Ayelet Brinn, Matthew Johnson, Jessica Kirzane, Amanda Miryem-Khaye Seigel, my co-editors Joel Berkowitz and Nick Underwood, and the anonymous peer reviewers for their feedback on drafts. Numerous colleagues responded to my request for references to sisters in Yiddish literature, including Faith Jones and Jessica Kirzane. Given the topic of this article, I am particularly grateful to my sister, Melissa Gollance, for her illustration of the Shomer sisters. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.

and reimagine the entire concept of literary “lineages” as they have been framed in Yiddish literary history.

When head was heavy, aching,
Your loving smile brought cheer;
When heart was bleeding, breaking,
You had for me a tear,
Sister dear!²

The Apache dance was one of the most scandalous dances in the early twentieth century. Also known as “danse des Apaches” or “The Dance of the Underworld,” it was a pantomimed dance depicting a physical altercation between a man and a woman—playing either a pimp and a prostitute or jealous lovers.³ While audiences today might rightly object to the name, which associates indigenous peoples with violence and Parisian street criminality, this style of dance was controversial at the time because of the brutal treatment of female dancers.⁴ This highly physical dance could involve lifting, throwing, pushing, slapping, and dragging a partner, or even threatening them with a knife. Indeed, renowned ballroom dancer Irene Castle described the Apache dance as a style “in which the male dancer tries to demolish the female dancer, as spectacularly as possible, and usually succeeds.”⁵ For audiences, this style of “tough dance” was a fascinating and primal display of heterosexual passion—and a battle of the sexes. There was perhaps no more theatrical embodiment of the violent potential of heterosexual eroticism than the Apache dance. It was precisely the kind of thrilling entertainment that would appeal to fans of vaudeville and melodrama, including the Yiddish-speakers who flocked to *shund* (popular entertainment) theatre.

In October 1929, sisters Rose Shomer Bachelis (1882-1966) and Miriam Shomer Zunser (1883-1951) submitted a Yiddish-language operetta called “Der liebes tants” (The Dance of Love) for American copyright.⁶ Yiddish theatre historian Zalmen Zylbercweig refers to the play in his Yiddish theatre lexicon as “Der apashe-tants, oder, Der liebes tants” (The Apache Dance, or, The Dance of Love).⁷ The title refers both to the operetta’s important dance scenes and, more metaphorically, to the idea of dance as a way of negotiating or thwarting expectations of love. In two acts and three scenes, the operetta depicts the relationship between two sisters who are in love with the same man. Zylbercweig does not say if the operetta was ever staged. The playwrights, identified as “di shvester Shomer” (the Shomer sisters), represented one half of the younger generation of the most prominent *shund* family. Like their prolific novelist and playwright father Shomer (pseudonym for Nahum Meir Shaikevitch, 1849?-1905), they knew that “the masses

² Excerpt from “Sister Dear,” poem dedicated to Miriam Shomer Zunser. Rose Shomer Bachelis, *Moods and Moments* (Los Angeles: s.n., n.d. [c. 1956]), 24.

³ Mark Knowles, *The Wicked Waltz and Other Scandalous Dances: Outrage at Couple Dancing in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009), 207n39.

⁴ The term “les Apaches” was used for French street gangs, reportedly because their violence was compared to perceptions of Apaches as violent and savage. Knowles, *The Wicked Waltz*, 207.

⁵ Irene Castle, *Castles in the Air* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1958), 57. On page 59 she mentions a female dancer who died of injuries sustained during an Apache dance.

⁶ For the sake of clarity, I generally refer to the playwrights by their married names.

⁷ Zalmen Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, vol. 3 (New York: Elisheva, 1931), 2113.

love razzle-dazzle and hocus-pocus,” as Sholem Aleichem claimed of their father in his famous 1888 polemic *Shomers mishpet* (The Judgment of Shomer).⁸ Deploying such tropes as show business, wedding festivities, and buffoonish “greenhorns,” the play is designed to entertain.⁹

Yet a deeper examination of “Der liebes tants” gives new meaning to *shund*, a genre that has usually been regarded as formulaic and uncritical. While the Apache dance motif conveys the potential violence and ambivalence of heterosexual desire, it can also be read against the grain to question the centrality of these very themes for the text as a whole. The Shomer sisters’ operetta undermines its own marriage plot by emphasizing the devotion of the two sisters.¹⁰ As such, “Der liebes tants” offers a new perspective on sibling relationships in Yiddish literature. By focusing on sisters—both as writers and as literary characters—we can rethink our understandings of the marriage plot and reimagine the entire concept of literary “lineages” as they have been framed in Yiddish literary history.

Family Ties, Literary Partnership, and the Shomer Sisters

Rose Shomer Bachelis and Miriam Shomer Zunser were born in Odesa and in 1891 immigrated to the United States with their mother, Dineh, and siblings (following their father, who had arrived in 1889).¹¹ Even as young children, the sisters performed amateur theatre together, including Avrom Goldfaden’s famous biblical operetta *Shulamis*, for which Rose served as “the prompter and the director of the play as well as all the stage hands rolled into one.”¹²

The sisters attended public elementary and high school in New York, followed by studying bookkeeping, stenography, and typing at the Eastman Business College (Bachelis) and studying at the City University of New York and art at Cooper Union College (Zunser). They worked with various Jewish organizations throughout their lives, and contributed to the Yiddish press, including the influential daily *Der tog*

⁸ Sholem Aleichem, “The Judgment of Shomer or The Jury Trial of All of Shomer’s Novels,” trans. Justin Cammy, in *Arguing the Modern Jewish Canon: Essays on Literature and Culture in Honor of Ruth R. Wisse*, ed. Justin Daniel Cammy, Dara Horn, Alyssa Quint, Rachel Rubinstein (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 158. Sholem Aleichem, *Shomers mishpet, oder, der sud prisyazhnykh af ale romanen fun Shomer* (Berdichev: Yankev Sheftil, 1888), 50.

⁹ “Greenhorn” is a pejorative term for new immigrant that I use here as a character type.

¹⁰ For the centrality of the marriage plot in modern Jewish cultural production, see Naomi Seidman, *The Marriage Plot: Or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

¹¹ Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* 3, 2088. Zunser spells her mother’s name “Dinneh” in *Yesterday*.

¹² Miriam Shomer Zunser, *Yesterday* (New York: Stackpole Sons, 1939), 240.

(The Day).¹³ Bachelis and Zunser shared this interest in propagating Jewish culture with their siblings. Their older brother, Abraham Shomer (1876–1946), was a lawyer, playwright in Yiddish and English, and actively involved in Jewish organizational life, such as co-founding the World Jewish Congress. Younger sister Anna Shomer Rothenberg (1885–1960) was a folk singer who wrote a book of Jewish folk songs and two plays based on Yiddish folk songs.¹⁴

In their writings, Zunser and Bachelis emphasize the incredible intimacy of their relationship. Bachelis notes that, even in the context of the close affection between all four siblings, “an altogether unusual love and understanding [*a gor bazunder libshaft un fashtendenish*] ruled between me and Miriam—an attachment [*tsugebundnkayt*] that persisted our entire lives, and reflected in our shared interests and activities, even when three thousand miles separated us after I settled in Los Angeles.”¹⁵ This close-knit sisterly bond is at once emotional, intellectual, and physical. When Zunser first mentions her sister in her 1939 family memoir *Yesterday*, she writes: “We were both about the same size and age. We clasped hands and walked down the ‘Narrow Little Lane’ to reach grandfather’s house.”¹⁶ This casual mention of the closeness between the sisters manages, in two sentences, to convey their proximity in age, similarity of appearance, and shared perspective that is expressed through a collective “we.” Bachelis, for her part, writes: “Miriam was a year younger than me, and as children we were the same height [*fun zelbn vuks*] and had an almost identical appearance [*kimat fun zelbn oyszen*]. We were always together, slept in one bed, and until her wedding (she got married before me) our dresses were made from the same fabric and in the same style, and we even combed our hair back in the same manner.”¹⁷ They looked, she adds, just like twins.

The only potential wrinkle in this idyllic portrayal of sisterhood seems to have come from the fact that Zunser, the younger sister, married early to Charles Zunser (son of renowned folk bard Eliakum Zunser, 1836?–1913) in 1905, whereas Bachelis did not marry until 1923, a topic she briefly alludes to in the previous quote.¹⁸ It is

¹³ Bachelis’s varied career included working as secretary to the director of the Hebrew Educational Society, as a social worker for the United Hebrew Charities, helping organize and becoming chair of Royte Mogen Dovid (while the name of this organization translates to Magen David Adom, i.e., Red Shield of David, it seems doubtful that it was an American branch of what is now the Israeli national emergency service, since in 1914 MDA had not yet been founded), organizing the Women’s Jewish Congress Organization and serving (with her sister Miriam) as one of ten female representatives from New York at the 1917 American Jewish Congress, and founding and chairing the Jewish Publicity Bureau in New York. Zunser, for her part, was a visual artist who taught painting at the Educational Alliance, worked as a librarian for the Hebrew Educational Society, raised three children, organized the Brooklyn branch of Hadassah, and in 1932 founded MAILAMM (acronym for Makhon Eretz Yisraeli L’Mada’ey ha-Musika, or America-Palestine Institute of Musical Sciences); her sister Rose organized the Los Angeles chapter of the organization. See Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* 3, 2112–16.

¹⁴ Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* 3, 2114; Zachary M. Baker, *Copyrighted Yiddish Plays at The Library of Congress: An Annotated Bibliography* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2004), 134.

¹⁵ Rose Shomer-Bachelis, *Vi ikh hob zey gekent: portretn fun bavuste idishe perzenlikhkaytn* (Los Angeles: [s.n.], 1955), 37.

¹⁶ Zunser, *Yesterday*, 30–31.

¹⁷ Shomer-Bachelis, *Vi ikh hob zey gekent*, 37. For a discussion of visual representations of sisterhood, particularly similarity in hair and dress, see Michael Cohen, *Sisters: Relation and Rescue in Nineteenth-Century British Novels and Paintings* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickenson Press, 1995), 14–15.

¹⁸ The 1915 census lists 32-year-old Rose Shomer living with her mother and brother in New York, and as of 1920 she was still unmarried. She married Isaac Bloom, a Yiddish writer, in 1923 and, following

difficult to determine whether, or to what extent, the sisters viewed Zunser's marriage as disruptive to their relationship. Although Zunser writes poignantly about the East European Jewish taboo on a younger sister marrying before her older sister, the Shomer sisters do not explicitly address Bachelis's feelings about Zunser's marriage in their published work. Nonetheless, the period surrounding Zunser's marriage was certainly painful for Bachelis, since it took place shortly after their father's premature death from cancer.

Starting in 1920, the two sisters wrote a number of plays together, including: "Eyne fun folk" (One of the Many, 1921), "Di makht fun gezets" (The Power of the Law, 1925), "Di tsirkus meyd" (The Circus Girl, 1928), and the operetta "Der zingendiker ganef" (The Singing Thief, 1930), all of which were staged.¹⁹ Even though Bachelis and Zunser's plays are virtually unknown today, they were quite successful during the playwrights' lifetimes. Their first play, "Eyne fun folk," was "an artistic and financial success"²⁰ that drew celebrated actress Bertha Kalich (1874–1939) back to the Yiddish stage and became part of her repertoire.²¹ Actress Celia Adler (1889–1979) performed in "Di makht fun gezets" in Philadelphia.²² The Shomer sisters' play "Dos tsirkus meyd" starred comedienne Molly Picon (1898–1992). The fact that these noted actresses performed the Shomer sisters' nearly forgotten oeuvre underscores the gendered ways in which certain forms of cultural production have been seen as "significant" while others have been long overlooked, even when popular in their day.

Gender and Authorship

Although Bachelis and Zunser were prominent cultural figures in their lifetimes, who achieved success as playwrights, their dramatic work in general—and "Der liebes tants" in particular—has been overlooked. The operetta brushes against cultural blind spots that partially explain its obscurity: it was a *shund* play written by two women. In terms of its register, genre, and authorship, "Der liebes tants" started out at a disadvantage, since *shund* has often not been regarded as a worthy subject of literary analysis, plays are less often published in book form, and women writers often had an uneasy relationship with the male-dominated Yiddish literary establishment. The efforts of "classic" writers such as I. L. Peretz to develop a Yiddish canon—and of influential cultural figures like Abraham Cahan and Jacob Gordin to cultivate an artistically ambitious American Yiddish theatre—left no room for evaluating the importance of the Shomer sisters, or the different perspectives they

Bloom's death, married Samuel Bachelis in 1943. For more about Zunser's wedding and the literary luminaries who attended, see Miriam Shomer Zunser, "The Jewish Literary Scene in New York at the Beginning of the Century," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 7 (1952): 277–97.

¹⁹ Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, 2116; Shomer-Bachelis, *Vi ikh hob zey gekent*, 48. Three additional plays, "Der liebes tants," "Der kabaret zinger" (The Cabaret Singer), and "A kind oyf katoves" (A Child as a Jest) were filed for copyright. See Baker, *Copyrighted Yiddish Plays at The Library of Congress*, 5–6. The sisters also wrote plays independently of one another. Several are mentioned in Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* 3, 2113, 2116.

²⁰ Shomer-Bachelis, *Vi ikh hob zey gekent*, 48.

²¹ Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* 3, 2112.

²² Typewritten synopsis, "for In the Hands of the Law," Rose Shomer-Bachelis 1911-1956, RG 519, Folder 1/48584, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York, NY. The synopsis refers to an earlier title for the play.

brought to the Yiddish stage.²³ In this and subsequent sections, I will tease out the implications of these three topics in reverse order.

The Shomer sisters's creative decisions are inseparable from their thinking about gender. Bachelis describes how she and Zunser came to write:

In 1920 [...] I felt compelled to write a play on the theme of woman, the eternal mama, who sacrifices her life for the happiness of her children.

When I told Miriam about what I was writing, she trembled. "Rose," she said to me, "This theme is also very close to my heart. Let me write the play with you."²⁴

As Bachelis explains, the sisters decided to collaborate because they were both interested in exploring the theme of the self-sacrificing Jewish mother. When Bachelis finished drafting the play, she gave it to her sister to edit. "Not only did she make improvements and perfect the dialogue, so too did she depict—in an artistic manner—the experiences and events in the life of a wife and mother, which she knew and understood far better than I, her unmarried sister."²⁵

Although Bachelis's depiction of her shared creative process with her sister is quite striking, she does not present her choice to write plays as itself remarkable. For a professional woman from a highly culturally-engaged family who had lived most of her life in the United States, writing a play and getting her work produced may not have seemed exceptional—yet compared with Zunser's account of the life of their mother, this shift in horizons was extraordinary.

Zunser describes her mother, Dineh (1848–1936), as a woman who practically crackled with rage at her father, Reb Michel Bercinsky, for his neglect of her education: she was both "a person of extraordinary mentality, imagination and temperament" and "a volcanic being ready to explode in the narrow confines of her environment."²⁶ Although her father invested heavily in the education of his sons, Dineh received almost no formal education and her request to learn Russian or Hebrew was denied. Once she was engaged to Shomer, Dineh was able to bask in her fiancé's rather romantic notions of courtship and her own belated social recognition for having been matched with a scholar, yet for the first roughly ten years of their marriage she contended with a husband who wrote and discussed Hebrew literature she could not read with his maskilic friends and was, moreover, incapable of earning an income—with the result that they lived on the charity of Dineh's parents. The early years of her marriage were also marked by the loss of her children. Her first four children all died by the age of five. Only after Shomer began to publish (and earn money for) his Yiddish-language works and, especially, after he wrote plays that allowed Dineh to become "the feared and respected Madame Shaikevitsch" who influenced the Yiddish theatre and hosted an Odesa salon, did the marriage improve and the harmonious family dynamic begin to emerge.²⁷ The couple's final four

²³ See Michael C. Steinlauf, "Fear of Purim: Y. L. Peretz and the Canonization of Yiddish Theater," *Jewish Social Studies* 1, nr. 3 (Spring 1995): 44–65; Nina Warnke, "Immigrant Popular Culture as Contested Sphere: Yiddish Music Halls, the Yiddish Press, and the Processes of Americanization, 1900–1910," *Theatre Journal* 48, nr. 3 (Oct. 1996): 321–35, esp. 323–24; Barbara Henry, *Rewriting Russia: Jacob Gordin's Yiddish Drama* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), esp. 23–25.

²⁴ Shomer-Bachelis, *Vi ikh hob zey gekent*, 47.

²⁵ Shomer-Bachelis, *Vi ikh hob zey gekent*, 47–48.

²⁶ Zunser, *Yesterday*, 76.

²⁷ Zunser, *Yesterday*, 139.

children, who were born after Shomer already started to become successful, all survived to adulthood. In 1921 Dineh eventually even published a booklet of her own, “*Zi hot zikh aleyn farplontert: a geshikhte vi a froy hot farshadkhnt ihr eygenem man...*” (She got herself all mixed up: How a wife married off her own husband...), under the name Dineh Shomer (Shaykevitsh).²⁸ Understanding Dineh's position as a writer under the shadow of her husband's renown, and as a woman whose body and fortune was tied to her husband's success and failures, illuminates the stark contrast between Dineh and her daughters, successful writers in their own right.

Yiddish Plays by Women Writers

Scholarship of plays by women in Yiddish has lagged behind awareness of women's participation in other Yiddish literary genres.²⁹ Numerous women writers who have received recent attention for their work in other genres—including Kadya Molodowsky, Chava Rosenfarb, and Yente Serdatsky—also wrote plays, yet these dramatic works have generally been neglected, and certainly gained less attention than their prose or poetry.³⁰ Perhaps the clearest example of this discrepancy is the reception of modernist Fradel Shtok, who wrote celebrated poems, short stories that received mixed reviews, and an English-language novel that was critically unsuccessful—yet for decades the play manuscript she copyrighted hid in plain sight at the Library of Congress.³¹

One reason for this lack of awareness could be that plays are often only published after they have first been produced, and a manuscript in the archives generally receives less scholarly attention than a publication, regardless of genre—yet even playwrights who did publish their plays, such as Jane Rose, have languished in

²⁸ Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* 3, 2100. See Dineh Shaykevitsh, *Zi hot zikh aleyn farplontert: a geshikhte vi a froy hot farshadkhnt ihr eygenem man...* (New York: [s.n.], 1921).

²⁹ Feminist scholarship has increased our awareness of the literary achievements of women who wrote in Yiddish. Poetry was the first genre to draw scholarly attention, followed by short stories. A number of memoirs have also been translated, and used for historical research. Women's participation in newspapers and literary journals has begun to garner interest. In contrast with other literary traditions, where novels were viewed as a feminine genre, scholarship of Yiddish-language novels by women was virtually nonexistent until recently. Generally speaking, we are experiencing a welcome boom in translations and scholarship of Yiddish women writers—although there is still much work to be done. For more about Yiddish women writers, see sources such as: Frieda Forman et al., eds., *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1994); Irena Klepfisz, “Di Mames, Dos Loshn/The Mothers, the Language: Feminism, Yidishkayt, and the Politics of Memory,” *Bridges* 4 (Winter-Summer 1994/5754): 12–47; Kathryn Hellerstein, “Translating as a Feminist: Reconceiving Anna Margolin,” *Prooftexts: A Journal of Yiddish Literary History* 20, nos. 1-2 (Winter/Spring 2000): 191–208; Kathryn Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586–1987* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014); Ayelet Brinn, “Beyond the Women's Section: Rosa Lebnsoyem, Female Journalists, and the American Yiddish Press,” *American Jewish History* 104, no. 2/3 (April/July 2020): 347–69; Anita Norich, “Translating and Teaching Yiddish Prose by Women,” *In geveb* (April 2020): accessed November 1, 2020.

<https://ingeveb.org/blog/translating-and-teaching-yiddish-prose-by-women>; Allison Schachter, *Women Reading Jewish Modernity, 1919–1939* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2021).

³⁰ To my knowledge, the one academic article about Yiddish plays by a woman writer is Debra Caplan, “Forgotten Playwright: Kadya Molodowsky and the Yiddish Stage,” in Rosemary Horowitz, ed., *The Legacy of Yiddish Women Writers: Critical Essays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 180–94.

³¹ Sonia Gollance, ‘A Dance: Fradel Shtok Reconsidered,’ *In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies* (Dec. 2017), < <https://ingeveb.org/articles/a-dance-fradel-shtok-reconsidered> > (accessed April 18, 2021); Fradel Shtok, *From the Jewish Provinces: Selected Stories*, trans. Jordan D. Finkin and Allison Schachter (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2022), xiv.

obscurity.³² There is also an overall tendency in Yiddish theatre scholarship to focus primarily on actresses, rather than the other myriad ways women were involved with the Yiddish stage—although these boundaries could be fluid.³³ Even though women wrote plays in the heyday of Yiddish theatre—and some were even produced—works by women have only just barely entered the Yiddish dramatic canon. If one accepts an expansive definition of *shund* drama as all plays that were neither literary nor canonical, then virtually all dramatic works by women playwrights could fit into this category.

***Shund* Theatre and the Shomer Family**

It is in this context that the work of Bachelis and Zunser is particularly important. As prolific playwrights from a well-known family with careers in the Jewish cultural sphere, they are precisely the kind of writers who might inspire scholarly attention. At the same time, their involvement with *shund* theatre helps explain their absence from scholarly sources. Indeed, the Shomer sisters were actively involved in recuperating *shund* and capitalized on their pedigree as daughters of the leading *shund* author, even though this association may have later contributed to their obscurity.

It is virtually impossible to discuss the history of *shund* without mentioning Shomer. His prolific writing over four decades—more than two hundred stories and novels that sold tens of thousands of copies, and over fifty plays—made him the most popular Yiddish writer of his day and created a Yiddish mass readership.³⁴ Meanwhile, Shomer's own works have received little attention on their own merits, and his involvement in a family project of popular Yiddish drama has gone unexamined.³⁵

In their writings, Shomer's elder two surviving daughters, Bachelis and Zunser, sought to present their father's contributions in a favorable light. In order to explain why they decided to collaborate on a book about their father, Bachelis writes,

³² For more about Jane Rose, see sources such as Zalmen Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, vol. 6 (New York: Elisheva, 1931), 5190–94. Alona Bach received a Translation Fellowship from the Yiddish Book Center to translate one of Rose's plays, a sign that this neglect of her work is changing.

³³ In a post-show discussion following a reading of Rokhl Kafritsen's play *Shtumer Shabes* (Silent Sabbath) at Vancouver's Chutzpah Festival on November 22, 2020, actor Shane Baker pointed out that actresses were often involved in writing their own material. Translations of the life writings of women who were involved in Yiddish theatre have been published in the "Women on the Yiddish Stage: Primary Sources" series of the Digital Yiddish Theatre Project. See Alyssa Quint and Amanda (Miryem-Khaye) Seigel, "Women on the Yiddish Stage: Primary Sources," Digital Yiddish Theatre Project (November 2021), accessed May 23, 2022.

<https://web.uwm.edu/yiddish-stage/women-on-the-yiddish-stage-primary-sources>.

³⁴ Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* 3, 2078; Jeremy Dauber, "Shomer," in *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (2010), accessed April 25, 2021.

<https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Shomer>. For a discussion of Shomer's reception, see Gennady Estraiikh, "The Best-Selling Shomer and his Fear of Emancipated Women," in ed. Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov, *Women, Men and Books: Issues of Gender in Yiddish Discourse* (Legenda, 2019), 80–82. For a discussion of the nineteenth-century Yiddish reading public that compares Shomer's great commercial success with that of his contemporaries, see Alyssa Quint, "Yiddish Literature for the Masses?: A Reconsideration of Who Read What in Jewish Eastern Europe," *AJS Review* 29, no. 1 (April 2005): 61–89.

³⁵ Estraiikh refreshingly provides a close-reading of a Shomer chapbook with an eye to gender, but does not discuss Shomer's relationships with actual women, or address how his daughters wrote about him. See Estraiikh, "The Best-Selling Shomer and his Fear of Emancipated Women," 80–92.

For many years I resented the fact that, when people mentioned the name of my late father, they only associated it with his fantastical novels, which were labeled ‘shund.’ [...] Why didn’t they mention Shomer the dramaturg, who was the first to write *lebensbilder* [pictures of life] for the new Yiddish theatre, and whose plays were performed in Yiddish theatres all over the world?³⁶

In short, according to Bachelis, the almost reflexive identification of Shomer with *shund* unfairly hinders our understanding of his many contributions to emerging Yiddish literature in the second half of the nineteenth century. This defense of Shomer’s Yiddish cultural achievements was very much in line with the way both sisters wrote about their immediate family. They took great pains to portray their parents and siblings as close-knit and engaged in the promotion of Jewish culture. In this context, the Shomer sisters’ defense of their father was the very foundation of their promotion of the entire family’s achievement. Yet while father-daughter relationships have received attention in Yiddish literary scholarship, Bachelis and Zunser’s collaborative work itself enables us to rethink the role of “lineage” and peer relationships in Yiddish literature, especially *shund*.³⁷

In “Der liebes tants,” Bachelis and Shomer focus on family relationships in a way that may have heightened its identification as a *shund* work. In Yiddish theatre, *shund* was often characterized by family relationships, emotion, and exploration of the possibilities available to women.³⁸ A play like “Der liebes tants”—however tightly constructed and engagingly written—is characterized as *shund* on account of its crowd-pleasing qualities and lack of political or literary ambition. Yet, I contend, it is a work that encourages us to think through the concept of sisterhood in a more serious way than has been approached by Yiddish literary studies thus far.

Literary Sisterhood and Female Rivalry

The theme of sisterhood has scarcely been addressed in a Yiddish literary context, whether with regard to fictional characters or the writers themselves. Yet this rich trope appears throughout world literature and invites examination.³⁹ The idea of sisterhood can be both abstract (a call for solidarity between women; participation in a religious order) and literal (a sibling relationship). Studies of literary sisterhood from other cultural contexts—especially British literature from the long nineteenth century—tend to focus on four areas of inquiry: 1) depictions of women who are siblings, 2) representations of peer relationships between women as a form of

³⁶ Shomer-Bachelis, *Vi ikh hob zey gekent*, 54.

³⁷ See, for instance, Lea H. Greenberg, “Curious Daughters: Language, Literacy, and Jewish Female Desire in German and Yiddish Literature from 1793 to 1916” (PhD dissertation, Duke University, 2021).

³⁸ For more about domestic dramas (of which “Der liebes tants” is an example), see Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 116.

³⁹ For sisterhood in fiction (by women), see studies such as: Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), such as 17–18; Anne Wan-lih Chang, “Psyche’s Sisters: Ambivalence of Sisterhood in Twentieth-century Irish Women’s Short Stories,” *Estudios Irlandeses* 8 (2013): 1–11. For a discussion of the importance of sibling bonds in nineteenth-century British literature, see Leila Silvana May, *Disorderly Sisters: Sibling Relations and Sororal Resistance in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2001), 17–19.

sisterhood, 3) discussions of authors who are biological sisters, and 4) analyses of networks or influence between women writers as a kind of sisterhood.⁴⁰ These different scholarly directions are often interwoven, as any discussion of “Der liebes tants” also demands, and they bring up such topics as biological kinship, ideas of femininity and womanhood, and the interplay of gender and authorship. In British literature, the concept of sisterly bonds between women writers is bolstered by the influential role of the Brontë sisters.⁴¹ Yiddish women writers did not have this same model of nineteenth-century canonical sisters,⁴² yet recent scholarship has shown correspondence and friendship between literary women who wrote in Yiddish.⁴³ If we reexamine the place of *shund* in the Yiddish canon, we might consider the Shomers to be the Brontës of Yiddish literary history, with regard to fame and family constellation (three sisters and one brother) if not writing style or posthumous acclaim.⁴⁴

Sisterly bonds have long inspired writers and fascinated readers, due to the comingled feelings of intimacy, sentimentality, competition, and jealousy that this relationship evokes. Such tension can be viewed both as destructive (sexual rivals competing over the limited resource of men) and constructive (a way for women to define themselves in relationship to other women who are their peers, especially in the relative safety of the home).⁴⁵ Literary scholar Sarah Annes Brown observes that “real and fictional sisters seem to share the urge for de-identification; each experiences the need to find her own niche, and subconsciously selects opposing aspects of her potential character to develop at the expense of those cultivated by her

⁴⁰ Notions of sisterhood are closely related to changing and culturally-specific notions of ideal femininity, yet at times this romanticization of sisterly bonds in literature can have the effect of masking the relationships between characters who are biological sisters. See Diana Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals in British Women's Fiction, 1914–39* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000), 60. For studies of women writers that describe them as “sisters,” see Patricia Duncker, *Sisters and Strangers: An Introduction to Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 28; Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 42, 101, 107.

⁴¹ For a discussion of the Brontës in the context of literary sisterhood, see Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals in British Women's Fiction*, 8.

⁴² The most famous sisters in Yiddish culture are not writers, like the Brontës, but instead singers—the Barry Sisters, Merna and Claire (née Minnie and Clara Beigelman). The duo delighted audiences with their catchy tunes, but their influential repertoire did not explore a sibling relationship.

⁴³ For instance, see Blume Lempel and Chava Rosenfarb, “I Feel a Connection to You,” trans. Ellen Cassidy and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub, *Pakn Treger* (Summer 2019/5779). Accessed April 11, 2021. <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/2019-pakn-treger-translation-issue/i-feel-connection-you>. See also a discussion of Miriam Karpilove’s postcards to Bertha Kling, Jessica Kirzane, “Miriam Karpilove’s FOMO,” *Bronx Bohemians*, accessed April 11, 2021. <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/language-literature-culture/bronx-bohemians/miriam-karpilove-s-fomo>.

⁴⁴ The most famous Yiddish literary siblings are associated with a fraught relationship with a sister, since Esther Singer Kreitman (1891–1954) is often overlooked in favor of her more famous younger brothers: Israel Joshua Singer (1893–1944) and Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904–1991). In comparison with the almost stultifying closeness of the Brontës and the deep intimacy of the Shomers, the Singers were divided by large gaps in age, immigration at different times and to different countries, and the premature death of Israel Joshua. The Shomer sisters thus offer an alternate model of emotionally close Yiddish literary siblings.

⁴⁵ See Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals in British Women's Fiction*, 1–3, 7, 50; Annes Brown, *Devoted Sisters: Representations of the Sister Relationship in Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 3; Helena Michie, *Sororophobia: Differences among Women in Literature and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 20–21.

sister.”⁴⁶ The relationship between Ethel and Florence in “Der liebes tants” exemplifies such ideas, since the two sisters are understood to exhibit very different qualities, despite being in accord emotionally on several issues.⁴⁷ When one considers the degree to which Ethel and Florence support each other, it is likely the safest and most stable relationship in the play—and, perhaps for this reason, the most interesting place for the playwrights to test out a romantic rivalry.

Sisterly competition is a virtually universal theme, yet it takes on a particular urgency in the context of East European Jewish matchmaking norms. Bachelis and Zunser did not need to go far afield to think about the complex mix of closeness and distance in a sister relationship: they could look to their own family. Although the Shomer sisters depicted their own relationship as idyllic—whether out of genuine closeness or as part of a desire to close ranks and protect the family “brand”—in *Yesterday*, Zunser describes several exquisitely fraught sister relationships between her mother and aunts. The most extended of these accounts is of Fraydel and Menye, her “beautiful but quarreling aunts”⁴⁸ who share a bedroom but are “in every way different from” each other: Fraydel is dark, slender, energetic, and her father’s favorite; Menye is pale, plump, languid, and the apple of her mother’s eye.⁴⁹ A conflict arises between the sisters when Fraydel risks becoming a spinster, a status Zunser grimly describes using the Yiddish term: “Modern bachelor girls who know something of the bitterness of being lonely and apart, can hardly guess at the depths of unhappiness reached by the *farzesseneh* of Fraydel’s generation. There was not only this bitterness to endure, but there was the scorn of the community to deal with.”⁵⁰ In a culture where marriage is viewed as an economic necessity for women and there is a taboo on a younger sister marrying while her older sister remains unwed, Fraydel comes to view Menye’s great popularity with men as a threat to her own future well-being—and Menye considers Fraydel’s unmarried state a hindrance to her own matrimonial goals. The family regards this situation as a tragedy demanding the “sacrifice” of one of the sisters: either Menye will be forced to wait for an older sister’s marriage that might never come, or Fraydel will bear the humiliation of having been passed over, which will further hamper her chances of marriage. Both the Shomer sisters and their fictional characters Ethel and Florence were, at least in relative terms, able to avoid the extreme social stigma of the unmarried older sister, since they represented a younger generation that had immigrated to the United States, yet this unhappy Old World situation likely figured in the background of the Shomer sisters’ figuration of their own relationship and their depictions of their characters. While they do not treat the possibility of an unmarried older sister as cause for desperation or social disgrace, it is a situation that could unsettle an otherwise balanced sister dynamic.

The play “Der liebes tants” takes place in an interwar context, at a time when gender roles and social norms were in flux. By depicting a romantic rivalry between sisters, Bachelis and Zunser engage with a literary plot that was popular in this

⁴⁶ Brown, *Devoted Sisters*, 3.

⁴⁷ For another example of Yiddish literary sisters with very different personalities, see Yente Serdatsky, “The Devoted Cousin,” trans. Jessica Kirzane, in *Have I Got a Story for You: More Than a Century of Fiction from the Forward*, ed. Ezra Glintner (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017), 117–24. For the Yiddish see Yente Serdatsky, “Der getrayer kozin,” *Forverts* (June 6th, 1920): 3.

⁴⁸ Zunser, *Yesterday*, 207.

⁴⁹ Zunser, *Yesterday*, 207–08.

⁵⁰ Zunser, *Yesterday*, 216.

period—even if they provide a twist on this trope, since each of the sisters is willing to prioritize the sisterly bond over the male object of desire. Diane Wallace notes that, in the interwar period, stories of women rivals—even rival sisters—replaced the nineteenth-century adultery novel in British fiction.⁵¹ Literary texts with the “male plot of female rivalry” presume that “getting a man is every woman’s *raison d’être* and that this will over-ride any other loyalties or interests.”⁵² The Shomer sisters wrote their play for audiences who may have been familiar with—or even expected—stories about female rivalry, yet it was written and set in a Jewish American context where other anxieties may have also come to the fore, such as immigration, political radicalism, repression of left-wing politics, and Prohibition.⁵³ Examining the relationship between maternal, old-fashioned Ethel and brazen, independent Florence in “*Der liebes tants*” demonstrates how peer relationships between women provided comfort and stability in a context where characters were negotiating shifting gender roles, as well as the extent to which they wanted to embrace the culture of their new country. Bachelis and Zunser similarly relied upon their sibling relationship as they participated in the Jewish cultural sphere, embarked upon their literary careers, defended their father’s legacy, and presented themselves to the world.

Lineage, Transmission, and Yiddish Literary Families

Sibling relationships, particularly between sisters, have remained largely unexplored in Yiddish literary studies. This absence is significant, because it points to a lack of awareness about peer relationships between women. When family ties are discussed in studies of Yiddish literature, descent and lineage are topics which more frequently come to mind, since male writers are often seen as trying to establish a modern Yiddish literary canon at the same time that female writers frequently struggled to gain entry into it. Sholem Aleichem’s characterization of Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (Mendele Moykher-Sforim) as the “grandfather” of Yiddish literature and his attempt to create a male genealogy for this new canon is only the most famous example of a gendered way of talking about literature that included Sholem Aleichem and Peretz as Abramovitsh’s heirs, named Goldfaden the “father of Yiddish theatre,” and rendered Yankev Dinezon the “mother” of Yiddish literature, since

⁵¹ While Wallace focuses on British literature, some of the social factors that undermined female solidarity on economic and political issues—including concerns about a “shortage” of men, anxieties about the “New Woman,” fear of lesbianism, and wealth disparities followed by economic depression—had an international scope. See Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals in British Women’s Fiction*, 10–45, esp. 12–13. This was a period when Miriam Karpilove’s *Togbukh fun an elend meyd* (*Diary of a Lonely Girl*) described how hard it was for marriage-minded young women to find similarly-serious suitors in New York, and in 1923 the English-language Broadway version of Sholem Asch’s play *Got fun nekome* (*God of Vengeance*) was shut down for indecency on account of a lesbian kiss. For a discussion of the political implications of Karpilove’s novel, see Jessica Kirzane, “Introduction,” in Miriam Karpilove, *Diary of a Lonely Girl, or, The Battle Against Free Love*, trans. Jessica Kirzane (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2019), 1–24.

⁵² Wallace, *Sisters and Rivals in British Women’s Fiction*, 1.

⁵³ For more about Jewish women’s involvement in political movements between the 1890s and 1930s, see Melissa R. Klapper, *Ballots, Babies, and Banners of Peace: American Jewish Women’s Activism, 1890–1940* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

best-selling romantic fiction apparently required a feminine presence even if it was provided in male form.⁵⁴

In contrast with these efforts by male Yiddish writers to establish an intellectual lineage with symbolic family relationships, feminist scholars have noted that female creativity is often (problematically) associated with biological reproduction—including references to bodies, children, and pregnancy. Yiddish women writers have contended with issues of transmission from one generation to the next, perhaps most famously in Molodowsky's poetic cycle "Froyen-lider" (Woman Poems) and Celia Dropkin's poem "Mayn mame" (My Mama), which suggest complicated relationships between literary daughters and their female ancestors.⁵⁵ In *Queer Expectations*, literary scholar Zohar Weiman-Kelman creates a queer genealogy of poetry by Jewish women who (regardless of actual sexual orientation) built intellectual rather than biological lineage because they generally did not have (or raise) children of their own.⁵⁶ Bachelis engages with similar ideas in describing how she and Zunker wrote their first play, when they were in their late thirties and Bachelis may have doubted that she would personally experience marriage or motherhood. Bachelis frames writing the play as a type of intellectual parenthood, noting that this was how "our first play was born" and that "we gave it the name *Eyne fun folk* [One of Many]."⁵⁷ The product of the combined creativity of the two sisters is thus described as a child with two mothers.

By comparing the completion of a play to actual childbirth, Bachelis differs quite markedly from the tone of her friend Miriam Karpilove, who in her satire "Theatre: A Sketch" delivers an ironic look at the condescension a woman playwright experiences when trying to get her first play staged—including a musical director who refers to the play as her "baby" and "child."⁵⁸ Yet unlike Karpilove, whose biting sketch may reflect her own gendered experiences as a writer, editor, and playwright,⁵⁹ Bachelis seems to welcome the idea of playwriting as a form of motherhood. At the same time, her choice to present shared sisterly creativity as a kind of parental project highlights the way sibling relationships between women have often been erased in Yiddish literature, since they are often overlooked or reframed in terms of more familiar parent-child relationships.

⁵⁴ For further discussion of this paradigm and its significance for feminist literary scholarship, see Irena Klepfisz, "Queens of Contradiction: A Feminist Introduction to Yiddish Women Writers," in *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*, ed. Frieda Forman et al. (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1994), 36–40; Zohar Weiman-Kelman, *Queer Expectations: A Genealogy of Jewish Women's Poetry* (Albany, NY: SUNY University Press, 2018), 115–16. For discussions of literary tradition in Yiddish literature by women, see Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition*; Weiman-Kelman, *Queer Expectations*, 96–98.

⁵⁵ See, for instance, Joanna Lisek, "'Mother, in the chain of generations, I am the broken link between you and my child': The Experience of Being a Mother and Daughter in Yiddish Poetry by Women," trans. Agnieszka Legutko, in *Women, Men and Books: Issues of Gender in Yiddish Discourse*, eds. Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov (Legenda, 2019): 36–64.

⁵⁶ Weiman-Kelman, *Queer Expectations*, 122.

⁵⁷ Shomer-Bachelis, *Vi ikh hob zey gekent*, 48.

⁵⁸ Miriam Karpilove, "Theatre: A Sketch," trans. Jessica Kirzane, Digital Yiddish Theatre Project, November 2019, <https://web.uwm.edu/yiddish-stage/theatre-a-sketch> (accessed Dec. 27, 2020). Kirzane notes that the original manuscript for this unpublished story can be found in the Miriam Karpilow papers, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (New York), RG 383, box 5.

⁵⁹ Karpilove was a prolific writer who, although best known for her prose and journalism, first achieved literary success with her 1909 play *In di shturm teg* (In the Stormy Days).

Relationships between sisters in Yiddish literature have often taken a backseat to relationships involving men, particularly homosocial relationships between men in a traditional culture that emphasized intimate male friendships.⁶⁰ The novel that is arguably the best-known representation of siblings in Yiddish literature, Israel Joshua Singer's *Di brider Ashkenazi* (The Brothers Ashkenazi), focuses on a competitive, contentious relationship between twin brothers and almost completely ignores their sisters.⁶¹ The twins' rivalry even evokes the biblical brothers Esau and Jacob, especially since the Ashkenazi brothers differ greatly in physical appearance. In this context, it is not surprising that the sisters in "Der liebes tants" are both in love with the same man, since the most famous sisters from the Hebrew Bible are undoubtedly the matriarchs Leah and Rachel, who both ended up married to Jacob.⁶²

When sisters are invoked in Yiddish culture, it is frequently in a context that demonstrates the solidarity of working-class comrades or, in the case of biological sisters, emphasizes loyalty over rivalry. Songs such as Sh. An-sky's Jewish Labor Bund hymn "Di shvue" (The Oath) call out to "brider un shvester" (brothers and sisters) to rise up together to achieve a shared political aim.⁶³ Other songs suggest sisterly devotion and sacrifice, such as Morris Winchevsky's haunting "Dray shvester" (Three Sisters) about working-class sisters in London who peddle wares to help each other survive—even if it means sex work,⁶⁴ or Binem Heller's heart-breaking elegy to the older sister who raised him and was murdered in Treblinka, "Mayn shvester Khaye" (My Sister Khaye).⁶⁵ As exemplified by "Mayn shvester Khaye" and by the relationship between 28-year-old Polly and fourteen-year-old Mura in Dovid Bergelson's short story "Friling" (Spring), there can be a slippage between the mother and sister role if an older sister raised younger siblings.⁶⁶ In such cases, as in "Der liebes tants," it may seem as if this fusion of roles is an attempt to efface the potential contentiousness of a sibling relationship by endowing it with the qualities of the mother-child relationship, one which in Ashkenazi culture often feels sacrosanct.⁶⁷ In part for this reason, "Der liebes tants"

⁶⁰ For discussions of male friendship in Yiddish literature, see Naomi Seidman, "Theorizing Jewish Patriarchy in Extremis," in *Judaism Since Gender*, ed. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt (New York: Routledge, 1997), 41–48; Seidman, *The Marriage Plot*, 90–94.

⁶¹ For more about this novel, see Sonia Gollance, "Dance as a Tool of Pleasure and Humiliation in I. J. Singer's *The Brothers Ashkenazi*," *Prooftexts* 39, no. 3 (2022): 422–53.

⁶² For another Yiddish example of a love triangle involving two sisters, see the 1938 film *Tsvey shvester* (Two Sisters).

⁶³ [Sh. Ansky], "Di shvue/The Oath," in Eleanor G. Mlotek, *Mir trogn a Gezang!: Favorite Yiddish Songs of Our Generation* (New York: Workman's Circle Education Department, 1987), 98.

⁶⁴ For analysis, see Vivi Lachs, "Singing in Yiddish about London: 1880–1949," *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 42, no. 2 (Autumn 2006): 100–01.

⁶⁵ This song appears on Chava Albertstein and the Klezmatiks, *Di Krenitse*, CD recording: Xenophile XENO 4052, 1998. For a discussion of this song in the context of Holocaust commemoration, see Abigail Wood, "Commemoration and Creativity: Remembering the Holocaust in Today's Yiddish Song," *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 35, no. 2 (Autumn 2002): 47.

⁶⁶ See David Bergelson, "Spring," trans. Joseph Sherman, in *Beautiful as the Moon, Radiant as the Stars: Jewish Women in Yiddish Stories*, ed. Sandra Bark (New York: Warner Books, 2003), 191–210. Dovid Bergelson, "Friling," in *Dertseylungen fun yidishe sovetishe shrayber*, ed. Y[isroel] Serebriani, T[evye] Gen (Moscow: Farlag "Sovetski pisatel," 1969), 91–106.

⁶⁷ Although texts like Lamed Shapiro's troubling pogrom story "Der tselem" (The Cross) include abusive mothers, Yiddish popular culture is full of sentimental texts about mothers, most famously the maudlin song "Mayn yidishe mame" (My Yiddishe Mama), as well as melodramatic films such as "Vu iz mayn kind?" (Where is my Child?).

ultimately emphasizes the warmth of feeling between the sisters as much—if not more than—heterosexual desire.

“Der Liebes Tants”

The play “Der liebes tants” concerns two sisters, Ethel and Florence, who live in New York with their father, Yosele Muzikant, a wedding musician. The elder sister, Ethel, is described as good and quiet in an old-fashioned way and has been like a second mother to her younger sister, Florence, a professional dancer who gets a thrill from her sexual power. Florence’s beau Murray, also a professional dancer, is enraged by Florence’s refusal to stop flirting with other men. He proposes marriage, but Florence does not want to lose her independence. Although she loves him, she resents his ultimatum that she not go out with other men—especially when accepting such invitations could help her career. Florence and Murray twice rehearse a passionate Apache dance in the first act, both before and after they argue about the state of their relationship. After the second, authentically angry version, Murray swears never to dance with her again and she says the same.

Unbeknownst to Florence, Ethel is secretly in love with Murray, although she is courted by Joe, a dance master who works with Florence and Murray. When Murray realizes Ethel’s feelings, he impulsively proposes marriage to her, and she agrees, having accepted at face value her sister’s declaration that her relationship with Murray is over. Florence returns home soon after—she had gone out to a cabaret with her theatre manager Simon, but when he made romantic advances she said she was leaving the theatre and declared her love for Murray. Now Florence is confronted with Ethel’s impromptu engagement party and needs to hide her feelings of rage at Murray from her beloved sister, who assumes that Florence is emotional because she is happy for her and wants to find a partner of her own.

Act II takes place a week later, on the day of Ethel and Murray’s wedding. Florence is practicing an aesthetic dance for a job in a new theatre.⁶⁸ She is distraught, and says she will never marry. Her cousin Sheyndl tells Florence her new dance is different from her previous dances, and Florence agrees, since the other dances were joyous. Joe warns Ethel not to marry Murray, but she refuses to listen. Murray wants to tell Ethel the truth about his feelings for Florence, but he cannot bear to do so while she is wearing a wedding dress. When Florence enters, Murray tells her there will not be a wedding, but Florence reminds him of Ethel and denies her own love for him. She also tells him she is with Simon, but Joe and rival singer Faye tell Murray that Simon and Florence are not actually a couple. Murray calls Florence back, demands to know why she lied, and insists she dance an Apache dance with him. Eventually, Florence agrees. When Ethel sees their loving dance, she realizes the truth of their feelings and tells her father that she and Joe will have a double wedding with Florence and Murray. Sheyndl adds that she and her beau Dovid will make it a triple wedding.

The Shomer sisters’ play engages with a number of tropes designed to delight viewers. The playwrights have included professional dancers and wedding musicians in their cast list, creating an excuse for lively performances that would entertain potential audiences. The play also relies on a number of stock characters—the old-fashioned father, self-sacrificing older sister, flirtatious younger sister, jealous

⁶⁸ Aesthetic dance was a term for early modern dance.

lover, comic greenhorns, sleazy theatre manager, and even a female rival. In part due to these rather clichéd characters, the plot arc appears at first glance to be quite conventional. Although the operetta involves pathos and messy emotions such as anger and jealousy, in the end the plot strands are neatly tied up with three young couples conveniently partnered for matrimony. The destabilizing force of female desire—whether Ethel’s inconvenient attraction to Murray or Florence’s unruly inclination to flirt—has been domesticated and restrained by marriage to men who can be pleased about having gotten what they (if not their brides) wanted in Act I.

Indeed, close attention to the portrayal of the sisters reveals attitudes that are likely to give contemporary audiences a moment of pause. Both sisters, but Florence in particular, are made to bear quite a lot of responsibility for the emotions of other people, especially men, who are displeased when the sisters do not behave as they would like. Yosele blames Ethel for Florence’s wayward behavior since, as her younger sister’s “second mama,” she is somehow more responsible for the behavior of her adult sibling than their actual parent.⁶⁹ Florence’s co-workers think she is fair game for salacious gossip about a possible affair with Simon, Joe feels it is appropriate for him to chide her for her flirtatious behavior (even though Florence points out that he is similarly popular with women), and her boss Simon makes a point of getting her alone so he can flirt with and chastise her, even threatening her job. Throughout the play, Ethel seems to be the only one to stand up for her sister.

Even the Shomer sisters’ English-language synopsis of the play describes Florence in a way that suggests that 1920s audiences (and perhaps the playwrights themselves) viewed her as a “problem” to be solved. Florence is initially described as “a spoiled child; a willful little flapper and a frightful tease.”⁷⁰ Yet after Florence “teases Murray unendurably” and he proposes to Ethel “with a desire to punish,” Florence discovers a maturity (one might even say a mature womanhood) in her suffering: “the little flapper kid, the girl who is supposed to have no heart or mind, rises to a great height. She swallows her sorrow and puts on a brave front. With a heartfelt [*sic*] of pain and a song on her lips she dances madly in celebration of her sister’s betrothal.”⁷¹ It is only by experiencing this pain that Florence is perceived to grow as a character—yet Murray does not appear to suffer quite as much from the partner swap as he does from his jealousy, and he is not required to compromise or develop emotionally to the same extent as Florence.

Apache Dance, *Broygez-Tants*, and the Spectacle of Heterosexual Eroticism

The idea that proper femininity is somehow masochistic is closely related to the thrill of the Apache dance—and the way that this play portrays heterosexual love. One of the crucial questions at the end of Act II is whether Florence and Murray’s final dance of the play will be a “tants fun has” [dance of hate], like the last time they

⁶⁹ Typewritten play, “Der liebes tants: operete in tsvey akten un dray bilder,” by the Shvester Shomer, Act I, Scene 2, p. 26, October 1929, D unpub. 3618, The Lawrence Marwick Collection of Copyrighted Yiddish Plays, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁰ Miriam Shomer Zunser papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations, Folder “The Dance of Love,” MSS File 342.4_6645, p. 1.

⁷¹ Miriam Shomer Zunser papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations, Folder “The Dance of Love,” MSS File 342.4_6645, p. 1–2.

danced together, or a “*liebe shpil*” [game of love], akin to the first rendition.⁷² Yet the choice to use an Apache dance as the eponymous dance of love from the play’s title is a strange one, since this dramatic dance is usually identified with passion, conflict, and athleticism rather than love. After all, the conclusion of the purportedly loving first performance of the dance involved Murray pulling a knife on Florence—an action which, if not staged or part of consensual power play, would be viewed as abuse.

Joe’s instructions for the first Apache dance performance make it clear that the “love” in this dance is predicated upon female submission to the will of a man. As he explains to Murray and Florence: “You beat her and torture her because she’s in your power. Get it, Florence? You’re his slave, his toy. He does what he wants to you... And you allow it... Because you love him, because you can’t live without him...”⁷³ The fact that characters apparently accept the idea that this performance is an embodiment of love is, if it is meant to be taken at face value, at best a failure to separate the inner feelings of the actors from the brutal scenario they are staging. This vision of “love” involves complete domination of a woman by a man who mistreats her because he can. If this is what “love” means to Joe and Murray, it is no wonder that Ethel and Florence are so resistant to prioritizing love or marriage to these men.

The most tender and mutual heterosexual relationship in the play is between the characters who provide comic relief. Sheyndl (who calls herself Jessica) and Dovid (Dougie) gamely attempt to perform Florence’s fashionable dances for themselves, but in a manner that leads Joe to think they are insane.⁷⁴ Yet these earnest, comical attempts at the dances poke fun at them in ways that reveal the bizarreness of this exaggerated, aggressive heterosexual eroticism. For instance, Sheyndl provides a homey Yiddish explanation for the name of the dance that cleverly puns on the word “*patsh*” [slap], thus replacing the foreign, underworld implications of the Apache dance with a literal description: “I get why they call it a *patshin’* dance [...] a *patsh* here, a *patsh* there.”⁷⁵ Sheyndl and Dovid attempt to follow the form of the dances, yet the Shomer sisters suggest that these greenhorns are unable to fully comprehend or perform a style of heterosexual eroticism that is dependent on male domination—presumably it is a taste acquired through Americanization. As Daniel Boyarin famously argues in *Unheroic Conduct*, a valorization of male aggression was counterintuitive to East European Jews, whose traditional masculine ideal was a gentle, scholarly man.⁷⁶ The motif of the Apache dance thus appears to exemplify an imported, non-Jewish heterosexuality, built upon ideas of male physical force and prowess.⁷⁷

At first, Sheyndl and Dovid’s scenario for their dance suggests a campy violence and exoticism, since Dovid will play a “Spanish murderer with a knife in his

⁷² Shvester Shomer, “*Der liebes tants*,” Act II, Scene 1, p. 24.

⁷³ Shvester Shomer, “*Der liebes tants*,” Act II, Scene 1, p. 24.

⁷⁴ The couple performs the Apache dance to practice for a vaudeville talent competition. They are later inspired to perform their own aesthetic dance. I refer to them as Sheyndl and Dovid because these are the names used in the stage directions.

⁷⁵ Shvester Shomer, “*Der liebes tants*,” Act I, Scene 2, p. 33.

⁷⁶ Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 3–5.

⁷⁷ My intention is not to suggest that Jewish men were necessarily less violent towards female partners than men in other cultures, but that such violence ran counter to widespread Jewish self-representations.

mouth” and Sheyndl a woman who flirts with him, only to be met with violence.⁷⁸ Yet instead of following a dance master’s stage directions (as did Florence and Murray), Sheyndl and Dovid work out a dramatic scenario for themselves, step by step, in advance, with mutual consent. At first, Dovid proposes several elements for their scene, including “I beat you up mercilessly” and “You embrace me, and I shove you to the ground.”⁷⁹ Sheyndl responds to each suggestion with an enthusiastic “Nice!”⁸⁰ She also describes the violence she will visit on *him*—“I get a hold of you and give you a few good wallops”—and Dovid predicts that their act will be a hit.⁸¹ Even the moment that most humorously reveals a disconnect between the dancers and the style of dance they are attempting is a sign that the dancers themselves are in accord with each other: Sheyndl decides at the last minute that it is too dangerous for Dovid to perform the dance with a knife in his mouth—“You could cut off your tongue”—and Dovid agrees to use a spoon instead.⁸² Sheyndl and Dovid hilariously miss the point of this ostensibly thrilling dance. Yet in missing the point, they also reveal the absurdity of the Apache dance and the ways in which it seems quite far removed from traditional Jewish gender expectations.

In a rare example of a theoretical work about Ashkenazi dance written contemporaneously with “Der liebes tants,” Polish-born American Jewish choreographer Nathan Vizonsky argues in 1930 that passionate dances were completely foreign to Jewish expression on the dance floor. Vizonsky compares the emotional energy of Jewish and non-Jewish dances in a manner not far removed from Boyarin. In his Yiddish-language article “Vegn yidishn folks-tants” (About Jewish Folk Dance), Vizonsky attempts to convince readers of the cultural significance of their own, unique style of folk dancing. He characterizes non-Jewish dances as “earthy” and dominated by “conscious passion.”⁸³ Jewish dances, on the other hand, emphasize “gentle humor,” “biting satire,” and “deep tragedy.”⁸⁴ As Vizonsky explains, “Jewish dance is modest.”⁸⁵ Although he focuses on folk dances, we can assume that Vizonsky would not regard the Apache dance as having a “Jewish” flavor. In both its passionate qualities and its emphasis on male dominance, the Apache dance differs markedly from East European Jewish expectations for (male) performance.

In traditional Ashkenazi culture, the most similar dance to the Apache dance is a wedding dance known as the *broygez-tants* (dance of anger), which Zunser refers to in *Yesterday* as the “Brayges Tanz,” which she translates as “Sulky Dance.”⁸⁶ This dance is also Vizonsky’s first example of the richness of Jewish folk dance. He praises it for qualities that differ from the Apache dance in important ways: “The naive folksiness, the gentle modesty of two people who love each other and nonetheless want to conceal it...”⁸⁷ Although Vizonsky initially refers to a version performed by a man and a woman, the *broygez-tants* is most famously danced by

⁷⁸ Shvester Shomer, “Der liebes tants,” Act I, Scene 2, p. 33.

⁷⁹ Shvester Shomer, “Der liebes tants,” Act I, Scene 2, p. 33.

⁸⁰ Shvester Shomer, “Der liebes tants,” Act I, Scene 2, p. 33.

⁸¹ Shvester Shomer, “Der liebes tants,” Act I, Scene 2, p. 33.

⁸² Shvester Shomer, “Der liebes tants,” Act I, Scene 2, p. 34.

⁸³ Nathan Vizonsky, “Vegn yidishn folks-tants,” *Shikage* 1 (1930): 28. I thank Karen Goodman for drawing my attention to this piece and sharing her work on it.

⁸⁴ Vizonsky, “Vegn yidishn folks-tants,” 29.

⁸⁵ Vizonsky, “Vegn yidishn folks-tants,” 29.

⁸⁶ Zunser, *Yesterday*, 103.

⁸⁷ Vizonsky, “Vegn yidishn folks-tants,” 29.

two women (often, particularly in the popular imagination, the two new mothers-in-law) as part of a cathartic public performance of conflict and resolution.⁸⁸ In this ritual dance, women are encouraged to display emotion—albeit in a structured way that adheres to expected forms.

Zunser describes this dance in the context of her parents' own 1866 wedding:

[...] two women pretend that they have had a quarrel, that one is sulky in consequence and that the other is very eager to make up with her. The offended one dances about keeping her face averted from her anxious friend. In vain the suppliant does everything possible to get the sulky girl's attention and to look into her eyes. In pantomime she offers the offended one gifts [...] At each refusal the suppliant wrings her hands and makes gestures of despair. Finally, the offended girl relents; the two then throw their arms about each other, the music screams with joy, and the women dance happily together.⁸⁹

Unlike the Apache dance, which may well end with one dancer drawing a knife on the other, the *broygez-tants* concludes with a conciliatory *sholem-tants* (dance of peace) that is anxiously anticipated by the crowd. If, following Boyarin and Vizonsky, we note a tension between non-Jewish expectations of male aggression and Jewish identity, then the Apache dance scenes are fraught both because of how they treat women and how they transform Jewish men. This style of dance layers two forms of foreignness that seem at odds with traditional Jewish masculinity: ideas of the Apache as violent and depictions of French working-class gangs whose violence is associated with these notions of Apache violence.⁹⁰ In contrast to the notorious blackface number in the 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*, a form of ethnic masquerade that allows Jewish characters to make a claim to American whiteness, the Apache dance is identified as much—if not more—with French popular culture and modish dancing as it is with American racial politics.

At the same time, one can argue that the play's abrupt yet tidy resolution makes the entire plot itself resemble a *broygez-tants*, with a highly theatrical conflict followed by a neat catharsis, the sudden triple marriage fulfilling the same dramatic function as the *sholem-tants*. And like the more familiar pairing of *broygez-tants* dancers, this play ultimately centers upon the dynamic between two women. In the case of "Der liebes tants," these women are not mothers-in-law, but rather the sisters, Ethel and Florence.

What happens when we acknowledge the disconnect between love and heterosexual eroticism in the operetta's Apache dance scenes, and regard this discrepancy as significant? How does our reading change if we think of the play "Der liebes tants" as a *broygez-tants*, a performance centered on the emotional relationship of two women? I contend that the generally overbearing and

⁸⁸ Vizonsky later describes such a dance, but does not give it a name. Vizonsky, "Vegn yidishn folks-tants," 29.

⁸⁹ Zunser, *Yesterday*, 103.

⁹⁰ Claire Mayo notes, "Journalists borrowed the name from popular travel books and repurposed it to portray urban 'savages' in Paris who rebelled against the factory clock, luxury, and the confines of a bourgeois lifestyle." She adds that this type was more imagined than real. Claire Mayo, "Spectacularizing Parisian 'Savages' during the Great Flood of 1910: How 'les Apaches' Overshadowed the Cult of the Hero in *les Quatre Grands*," *Journal of the Western Society for French History* 46 (2018), accessed June 16, 2022. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.0642292.0046.009>.

problematic nature of the heterosexual romance plot in the play actually opens up a space for us to think more deeply about sisterhood in “Der liebes tants.”

Decentering the Marriage Plot

By deploying the outrageous, problematic Apache dance motif, “Der liebes tants” simultaneously promotes and questions heterosexual eroticism. This questioning allows us to read the play against the grain and think beyond the marriage plot to the depiction of the sister relationship. In her queer reading of Karpilove’s *Togbukh fun an elend meyd* (*Diary of a Lonely Girl*), Faith Jones endeavors to “reframe our unnamed narrator and her dreary trek through unappealing courtship rituals as a story that affirms other modes, other mores, and rich diversity of sexual being.”⁹¹ Much like Weiman-Kelman, Jones contends that even heteronormative Yiddish literary texts can be “read queerly”—regardless of the intentions of the author or the presumed sexual orientation of her characters.⁹² This style of reading comports with the views of feminist poet Adrienne Rich, who in her influential 1980 essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” pushes back on what she defines as “compulsory heterosexuality”—an assumption not only of heterosexuality but also that romantic relationships with men are the most important ones in women’s lives, and that male dominance should be accepted as a given. This viewpoint has, she argues, “crushed, invalidated, forced into disguise” different forms of community between women—whether or not this emotional closeness shared by women is sexual.⁹³ Rich’s call to question assumptions of the centrality of heterosexual relationships when interpreting literary texts can spur us to explore peer—and sibling—relationships between women more deeply.

Read cynically, “Der liebes tants” is a play about two women who end up in circumstances (married to Murray and Joe) they did not want to be in at the beginning of the play—and we and they have been convinced to be happy about it. They end up in this situation for several reasons, including significant pressure from men to marry. This pressure is brought to bear because these men repeatedly play the sisters against each other: first Murray gets Ethel to reveal her feelings so that he can punish Florence, then Joe and Murray work together to get Florence to demonstrate her feelings for Murray in front of Ethel so that Murray can avoid a difficult conversation with his fiancée on their wedding day. The sisters learn that there is not much alternative to submitting to the desires of men. If, like Ethel and Florence, a woman tries to make her desire for independence or lack of romantic interest clear, she will ultimately get punished. And not just any punishment, but through the manipulation of the emotions of a beloved sister. The best option is to just accept the situation and get married.

If we take this view, “Der liebes tants” is not a work that extols the value of heterosexual romance, but rather one that beats women over the head (in the case of the Apache dance quite literally) with the pleasure, pain, confusion, and overall inevitability of partnering with a man. The male characters seem a bit too interested in bending women to their will for the play to be truly satisfying as a romance, at

⁹¹ Faith Jones, “*Diary of a Lonely Girl: A Queer Reading*,” *In geveb* (Oct. 2020), accessed April 28, 2021. <https://ingeveb.org/articles/diary-of-a-lonely-girl-a-queer-reading>.

⁹² Jones, “*Diary of a Lonely Girl*.”

⁹³ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence (1980),” *Journal of Women’s History* 15, no. 30 (Autumn 2003), 13.

least for contemporary readers. Yet “Der liebes tants” is not without touching scenes of love and affection.

The Shomer sisters’ play tells the story of two sisters who—despite all of the ways the men around them try to test and separate them—remain loyal to each other like they are to no one else. Ethel defends Florence’s independent ways and theatre career to their father, saying that she has “a clever head” and “a strong character.”⁹⁴ Nobody else defends Florence in this way. Florence thanks Ethel effusively for her support, calling her: “more than a sister, Ethel, you’re my mama, my sister, my grandfather, my grandmother, my everything—all mixed in together.”⁹⁵ Even though Ethel threatens to kill Florence if she toys with their shared object of affection, each of the sisters is ultimately willing to give Murray up out of consideration for the other’s feelings. Ethel keeps her feelings a secret when Florence and Murray are together, Florence hides and lies about her feelings when Ethel is engaged to Murray, and Ethel withdraws from her engagement as soon as she sees that Florence is still in love with Murray (and he with her in turn). Each sister views her relationship with Murray as something that can be sacrificed (however painfully), yet Ethel and Florence’s relationship is not negotiable. What we get, therefore, is a heterosexual romance plot that nonetheless reveals the triumph of sisterhood.

As embodied most clearly by the Apache dance motif, this is a play whose conflicts are largely spurred by relationships between the sisters and men (Florence’s romantic problems with Murray, Yosele’s disapproval of Florence’s behavior, Murray’s impulsive proposal to Ethel), and the sisters’ unwillingness to trouble each other with their affection for Murray. The sisters themselves are protective and supportive of each other, each wanting the other to find happiness even at the cost of her own unrequited love. The happy resolution of the play is not that each sister achieves wedded bliss (which seems highly doubtful), but instead that they achieve this change of status at the same time. By participating in a double marriage, Ethel and Florence avoid the awkwardness of the playwrights’ own asynchronous family lives and the concerns about marriage order that plagued Zuser’s aunts. Even in marrying men, they are emphasizing their families of birth—in a sense reiterating the choices of the two playwrights, who say little in their prose works about their married relationships, instead writing warmly and extensively about their natal bonds and relationship with each other.

Conclusion

In her seminal history of the Yiddish theatre, Nahma Sandrow notes that although *shund* was a lowbrow art form designed more for commercial success than critical acclaim, “that does not necessarily mean that it’s bad theater. It can have energy, theatricality, flair, flashes of art and wit; [...] what people call *shund* can be very good stuff indeed.”⁹⁶ “Der liebes tants” is entertaining, humorous, and even thrilling in the best sense of this style.

At a surface level, the “liebes tants” of the play’s title is an Apache dance, which is performed four times throughout the play, with each iteration connoting different heterosexual relationship dynamics. The melodramatic romantic plot itself

⁹⁴ Shvester Shomer, “Der liebes tants,” Act I, Scene 2, p. 26.

⁹⁵ Shvester Shomer, “Der liebes tants,” Act I, Scene 2, p. 27.

⁹⁶ Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 110.

can also be taken as a metaphorical dance, in which the competing desires of Florence, Murray, Ethel, and Joe get resolved.

Yet at the same time, the very strangeness of how the Apache dance motif is deployed invites us to take a deeper look at the rather troubling marriage plot, and to think more seriously about the role of sisterhood. Indeed, the crowning achievement of this purportedly heterosexual romance is the cementing of the sisterly bond. The Shomer sisters' play can therefore be read queerly in order to resist the expectations of the marriage plot and recuperate other vectors of desire and love, and other kinds of reproduction, such as two women making a play together.

In this sense, the "liebeshants" is not merely a dance of love—it can also be construed as a *broygez-tants*. Not only does the Apache dance more logically convey anger (or passion) than romance, the play itself—like the form of the *broygez-tants* described in Zunser's memoirs—emphasizes tension and reconciliation in a relationship between women. This tension and reconciliation takes place in a context of shifting ideas of courtship, gender roles, music and dance styles, and codes of conduct, all of which are layered together by the playwrights in a form designed to delight audiences. By emphasizing the love rather than anger of the dance form, Bachelis and Zunser privilege an emotion that has historically played an important role in narrations of Jewish encounters with modernity—and in *shund* theatre—but in a way that encourages us to focus on peer relationships between women.

Given that ideas of lineage were so central to the project of developing a Yiddish canon, and the way in which sisterhood is often identified with notions of female rivalry and support that seem far removed from the concerns of "classic" Yiddish writers, it is not so surprising that *shund* becomes the venue for examining a relationship between sisters. Perhaps only the Shomers, protecting their father's legacy and emphasizing their own close bonds, could write a romance plot and imbue it so strongly with notions of family. And yet, as pioneering woman playwrights writing about women and sisters portraying sisters, what they contribute is at the same time so much more.