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This book is an insightful, thoroughly researched presentation of a strange and fascinating medieval text. *Sefer Ahavat Nashim* is a Hebrew compendium of magical and medical prescriptions. Copied in the late fifteenth century, it seems to have been written some two hundred years earlier, in Provence or Catalonia. Caballero-Navas’ edition includes a transcription of the Hebrew text, which a reviewer with access to the manuscript has called “marvellously accurate and reliable,”

1 a clear, annotated English translation, and several chapters on the text’s historical and literary context.

For the general reader, I would recommend beginning with *Sefer Ahavat Nashim* itself (pages 108-176), and reading the rest of the book selectively, perhaps skipping technical discussions of Hebrew linguistics or medieval medical literature. Scholars will find the entire book, including a glossary of medical and technical terms (215-282), profoundly useful.

While *The Book of Women’s Love* has been reviewed primarily in journals of medical history,

2 Caballero-Navas’ interests are surely shared by many more readers. She is motivated by her “commitment to an understanding of the historical experience of women,” and her desire for “a glimpse of women’s lives and of their experiences regarding the care of their bodies” (1).

The researcher pursuing such interests in the field of Jewish literature faces many difficulties. Is a given text about women? Written by a woman? Intended for women readers? These questions are not even relevant to most Jewish texts. When they can be asked, the answers are often unclear -- at best. This has been brought home to me through work on an Old Yiddish manuscript about the lives of women in the author’s time and in the Bible, which I refer to as “Many Pious Women”.

3 Copied, from an original of unknown date, not long after the manuscript Caballero-Navas worked from, this text adds a dimension to the contextualization of *Sefer Ahavat Nashim*.

The anonymous authors of both works share a fascination with women’s everyday bodily experience. Sexuality, pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding are important topics in both texts. The narrator of “Many Pious Women” tells stories of the hardships Jewish women face in these areas, summing up: “If they remembered all this before taking husbands, they’d rather drown themselves; they’d rather lie with a dried-out stick than ever sniff a man!” The compiler of *Sefer

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1 See the review by Joseph Ziegler (University of Haifa) in *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 79.4 (2005) 803-805.
2 Besides Ziegler’s, the only other review I have found is in *Social History of Medicine* vol. 18 n. 2, 325-336, by Leigh Whaley. Caballero-Navas has written on her own research in “Secrets of Women: Naming Female Sexual Difference in Medieval Hebrew Medical Literature”, in *Nashim* 12, Fall 2006, 39-56.
3 An annotated translation of this work, by Harry Fox and Justin Jaron Lewis, tentatively titled *Many Pious Women*, is forthcoming from JPS.

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Ahavat Nashim acknowledges women’s suffering in the more optimistic context of providing “tried and tested” remedies for it, including prescriptions to facilitate or prevent pregnancy, or to cause an abortion.

Yet characterizing these texts as works about women is problematic. The most substantial section of “Many Pious Women” is a retelling of the Book of Esther, focused on the contest between Haman and Mordechai. Sefer Ahavat Nashim contains many prescriptions intended for men; for example, there is a long section on dealing with toothache, which consistently refers to the patient in the masculine (132-136). The most that can be said is that these texts are largely about women.

There is a slight possibility that the author of “Many Pious Women”, written in the Ashkenazi vernacular, may have been female. The readers addressed by that text are men who need to be informed about women’s lives – although the manuscript concludes with the copyist’s blessing to his patroness, pointing to a female readership of at least one. In the case of Sefer Ahavat Nashim, Caballero-Navas concludes that the compiler was a man; as she notes, “he refers to himself in the first person masculine” (9). Was this text at least meant for women readers? Caballero-Navas argues that it was, claiming “a female audience is implicit throughout the text” (42).

I am not sure the text bears this out. The first several prescriptions are addressed to men, who want ways to make women desire them (108-112). As noted, many of the health-related prescriptions refer to male patients. In addition, the majority of the recipes would require access to a whole apothecary’s cabinet of ingredients. A prescription to help a woman conceive requires forty-three ingredients, including garden herbs, wild plants, and coral, just for the first stage of treatment (144). Evidently, these instructions are addressed to professional practitioners of medicine or magic, with access to substantial resources.

While Caballero-Navas cites evidence that there may have been individual women in this category (44, 46), this text is surely not addressed to any broad readership of women concerned with “the care of their bodies.” It is meant for a cadre of professionals who had male and female clients, and among whom a few women may possibly have been found.

Caballero-Navas is on more solid ground in pointing out that some of the recipes in the text come from the magical/medical folk practices of women. As an example, she shares her delight in discovering “that one of [the text’s] magic formulas for ensuring the love of the beloved – the addition of some drops of menstrual blood to his food or drink – is still used today” in Spain, in Israel, and in a variety of cultures world-wide (50).

This approach, grounding a somewhat esoteric work in the lived experience of women, is a welcome corrective to the textual focus of pre-feminist scholarship. It complements Caballero-Navas’ own extensive investigation of the literary sources of Sefer Ahavat Nashim in Hebrew, Arabic, Latin and Catalan texts. In her discussion of the magical technique called “ligatures” she skilfully draws on literature as testimony to experience, showing that this type of magical practice is mentioned in sources ranging from the Qur’an to the interrogation records of the Inquisition (60-61).
The primary argument of Caballero-Navas’ section entitled “Magic is a living practice” is that “especially regarding magic, written texts do not predate human experience, but they are rather based upon it” (52). Some of the wording of Sefer Ahavat Nashim itself reinforces this idea; for example, the second prescription in the text is described as “a love formula that has been tested” (108).

What then are we to make of that very prescription? It involves putting blood or semen inside an eggshell and placing it under a brooding hen for three weeks. Then, “You will find inside a worm-like human figure [tzurat ben-adam] that has a little life,” which is to be dried up and made into a love-powder (108).

This creation of a homunculus, impossible according to our current understanding, calls into question the notion that magical texts are grounded in lived experience – even when they explicitly claim to be. In order to maintain the hermeneutic of experience when confronted with such recipes, we would have to accept that medieval people literally lived in a different world from ours, in which biology functioned differently.

This approach would be acceptable in the Jewish intellectual tradition; the expression nishtaneh hateva, “nature has changed”, is used in rabbinic discourse to justify discrepancies between Talmudic and modern medicine. Most scholars, however, will likely prefer to drastically qualify Caballero-Navas’ thesis. Medieval magic, like medieval science in general, emerged from a cultural context in which lived experience carried some weight but the testimony of books, especially old books, carried more.

This is unfortunate for our attempts to catch a glimpse of women’s real lives. Caballero-Navas follows her section on magic as a living practice by arguing that the misogynistic theme of women as witches, found in both Jewish and Christian sources, reflects a lived reality in which women were particularly involved with the practice of magic (52-55). But if the prescriptions in Sefer Ahavat Nashim mostly reflect “book learning,” they tell us little about this women’s folk culture of magic, if indeed it existed.

To my own reading, Sefer Ahavat Nashim provides a glimpse, not of women’s lives, but of women’s role in the male imagination of a particular medieval Jewish culture. In this imaginary world, women are first of all objects of desire, whom a man with the right knowledge can bend to his will. As the first prescription promises, “she without a doubt will immediately do everything you wish” (108). Today’s successors to these prescriptions are manuals on “scientific” techniques of seduction, widely available through the internet.

As in North American culture today, women’s bodies are seen as malleable, objects to reshape to meet esthetic standards. Only the desired standard seems to have changed somewhat: a series of remedies begins, “To make big breasts smaller…” (138).

Women are also seen as sexual beings with their own desires – focused on men. Caballero-Navas insightfully introduces “[t]he concept of obligatory heterosexuality for women” into her discussion of these passages (64). Women’s desires may require enhancement for the man’s pleasure: a spell is required to bring a woman to the point where “she will be very excited and...
will shake her whole body because of the heat [of her lust]” (114). Still, the narrator exudes confidence in stating about the erect penis, “there is nothing better for women, and… they love their men because of it” (118).

On the other hand, the spells offered for women to use on men are not focused on sexual pleasure, but on maintaining relationships: “For the woman whose husband hates her and wants to leave her… To bind a man so that he cannot lie with any other woman besides his wife…” (112, 114).

As Caballero-Navas notes, these relationship-oriented prescriptions include formulae “[t]o provoke a quarrel between a man and his [male] friend” (114). Given the erotic context, I think Caballero-Navas is correct in seeing here “a hint of a homosexual relationship” between the two men (66). She cites evidence of male homosexual relationships from Iberian Jewish poetry, while conceding that this “was expressly forbidden by Jewish law” (66).

I would add, in support of Caballero-Navas’ argument, that a great many things in this text are forbidden by Jewish law. It takes for granted that both women and men, married or not, have a preference for multiple sexual partners which can be restrained only by magical means. Recipes to be ingested include many non-kosher ingredients. The recommendation for a woman to “knead a cake with her menstrual blood and give it to [her man] to eat” (114) contravenes the laws of menstrual separation and the taboo on the consumption of blood. Thus this work’s picture of Jewish society is not a halakhically observant one. Perhaps this is why the text begins with the phrase, “I will commence the Book of Women’s Love even though it leads one to sin and bear guilt” (108).

In this context a reference to male homosexuality is not at all unlikely. I see another such reference in a series of sex-related prescriptions for men where the desired lover seems to be sometimes female and sometimes male: “kiss or touch the person whom you want and he will love you… touch her flesh… If both of them eat of it they will never leave each other… he will do as you wish… he will love you passionately” (111-112, emphasis added). We may thus have an unexpected glimpse of medieval male bisexuality.

A glimpse of women’s lives and experiences is still lacking, and I sadly conclude that this book as a whole provides such a glimpse only through a thick filter of male traditions and fantasies. Thus it disappoints some of the hopes raised by its author and shared by this reader. Nevertheless, readers of The Book of Women’s Love will find it amply rewarding. All the questions and caveats raised in this review have only been possible because of the multifaceted and skilful work of Caballero-Navas in bringing to life a difficult text, challenging and revising our impressions of the Jewish past.

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