

God, Beauty, and the Body
Jewish Literature of Muslim Spain
Senior Seminar: Religion 375

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Ladd 106

Spring 2010
MW 2:30-4:20

Office hours: M: 4:20-5:30 T: 1-2

Course Description:

This course is about religion, bodies, and beauty. Specifically, it focuses on medieval ideas about the human relation to the material world, to the embodied self and to other bodies as a site for human relation to the divine, and aesthetics, or the conditions for appreciating and valuing these relations. We'll examine Hebrew and Arabic literature of Muslim Spain, because of its emphasis on these themes, because of its importance to the formation of medieval European culture, and to modern conceptions about embodiment and beauty.

These attitudes are produced and articulated in three important ways in this time and place: by government and the material conditions it creates (economics and law), by philosophy, and by literature. The system of government 'produces' both community and body. Philosophy theorizes human identity in relation to God, to the material world, and to other bodies. Poetry and belletristic literature animate these concepts and set them in motion, experimenting with them by trying them out in imagined situations. This course will focus on the second two categories, philosophy and literature.

The conceptions emerging in the religious literature of Muslim Spain persist in contemporary culture. We will pay attention to the way that these concerns carry over into contemporary discourse on embodiment, sexuality, and beauty in contemporary religious thought. This will be the point of entry for your capstone projects.

Getting in touch:

My office hours are Mondays from 4:20-5:30, and Tuesday from 1-2 in 215 Ladd Hall or by appointment.

Required Texts:

1. Raymond Scheindlin: *Wine, Women, and Death*
2. Raymond Scheindlin: *The Gazelle*
3. Lenn Evan Goodman: *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*
4. Jane Gerber: *Jews of Spain*
5. Plato's *Symposium*
6. Aaron Hughes: *Texture of the Divine*

Coursepack, distributed in class

Course Requirements:

1. Participation (10%) You know what to do. Read everything. Think, ask, listen, talk.
2. Reading and topic selection. You will choose one reading related to your final paper. It will be assigned for the class to read, and you will lead discussion that day. These are designated “capstone days” on the syllabus. You’ll also assign the reading question.
3. Seminar Paper and summary of research (20%). Each student will lead a class discussion on the reading related to his or her topic research topic. Each discussion leader will need to prepare a “seminar paper” which will guide the discussions. All seminar papers will be sent to the class list two full days prior to the presentation. All students are expected to print these out and to bring them to class with their own questions and comments.
4. Annotated Bibliography (10%) The bibliography should contain at least ten to fifteen sources, depending on your topic. It should contain a mix of primary sources, and secondary sources such as books, book chapters, and scholarly articles. Some of you will probably also use interviews as primary and secondary sources.
5. Paper abstract (5%)
6. Final Paper (55%) This is your capstone project. It will be 20-25 pages long. We’ll talk about it. At length.

Assignment Deadlines

1. Preliminary thesis & annotated bibliography **due March 22nd (10%)**
2. Paper abstract (1-2 p. summary) **due April 5: (5%)**
3. Final paper due Monday, **May 10th: (55%)**

Reading Schedule:

Unit 1: Intellectual Background:

1/25-7

1. Gerber, *Jews of Spain*, Introduction and Chapters 1-3

Body

2/1-3: Our Preoccupations with the Body

1. Bryan S. Turner “Body,” *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 2006, vol 23
 2. Turner: “Social Fluids: Metaphors and Meanings of Society” *Body & Society* 2003; 9.1
- What is our interest in the body, according to Turner? How has it changed over time? How does the body signify to us? Does this make sense?

2/8-10: Ancient and Late Antique Sources on the Body

1. Plato’s *Symposium*, intro and text up to but not including Aristophanes’ speech
 2. *Symposium*, Aristophanes to the end
- How does the *Symposium* theorize love? How does it theorize the body? What are their respective functions, and how are they related to each other?

2/15-17

1. Ariel and Chana Bloch: *Song of Songs*, intro plus chapters 1-4
 2. *Song of Songs II*, chapters 5-8 plus Afterword
- Same question, different text:** How does the *Song of Songs* theorize love? How does it theorize the body? What are their respective functions, and how are they related to each other?
- Now:** Compare Plato’s *Symposium* and *Song of Songs*.

2/22-4: Theorizing Religion and the Body

1. Stephen P. Hopkins: “Extravagant Beholding: Love, Ideal Bodies, and Particularity.” *History of Religions*, 2007, vol. 47. 1

2. Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, chs.1 and 2, pp. 31-77

Is there a specifically Jewish way of thinking about beholding, about embodiment, and about the aestheticization of the body? If so, how do we see this? Either way, what are the commonalities of the viewpoints we’ve encountered so far?

Unit 2: Philosophy

3/1 Jewish Theologies on Embodiment

A. Joel Kramer: “Islamic Background of Jewish Philosophy.” From *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*

B. Saadya Gaon: *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*: Chapter 6: “On the Nature of the Soul”

How does Saadya define body and soul? What are his ideas about the relation between them? What does this mean practically for those subscribing to his views?

3/3

A. Paul Fenton: Judaism and Sufism pp201-17 From *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*

B. Bahya Ibn Pakuda: from *Duties of the Heart*: Chapters 2 and 9: “Meditation on Creation,” and “On Asceticism: Its Kinds and Advantages”

According to Bahya, what is the value of the created world, and what is accomplished by meditating on it? What sorts of theories of beholding and of embodiment are implicit in Bahya’s ideas about these things? What are the advantages of asceticism, and how does this use and adapt the theories of beholding and embodiment described in chapter 2?

3/8

Ibn Gabirol: *Keter Malchut*

A. *Keter Malchut*, from Cole, *The Poetry of Ibn Gabirol*

Is the medium the message? Compare ibn Gabirol’s ideas about the nature of creation to those of other Jewish philosophers we’ve read so far. In doing so, pay attention to the ways in which he theorizes the human body. Does the poetry treat it differently than the philosophy?

3/10: catch-up, wrap-up, planning

We will reschedule the class that is to meet on the 8th for the 11th or hold an extended class on Wednesday

3/13-21: Spring Break

3/22-4

1. Aaron Hughes: *Texture of the Divine*: introduction, ibn Tufayl, pp 95-102

2. Goodman: Ibn Tufayl: *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, pp 3-6; 103-167

What sort of anthropology does this story communicate? What are its suppositions about gender relations? Sexuality? Maternity? Why might these suppositions matter?

3/29-31

No class 3/29, Passover: we will make this up on Friday, 4/2

3/31: Aaron Hughes: *Texture of the Divine*: pp13-48

4/2: Hughes, chapter 2: Reading Between the Lines: Text as Encounter with the Divine

How does this help us think about the reception of the texts we've read so far? What might they have meant to their medieval readers, and how is that different and similar to the way it might mean to contemporary readers?

4/5-7: Hayy wrap-up

Chapters 4 and 5

Hayy ben Meqitz: pp189-209.

Compare to *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, draw conclusions about the Hughes text:

What are the functions of beauty, the body and the senses in the *Hayy* materials we've read so far?

4/12: Capstone Project Day: 2 presentations

Unit 3: Poetry

4/14: The New Poetry

1. Michael Sells: on Love, from *Literature of Al-Andalus*, pp 127-58

2. Philip Kennedy: *Abu Nuwas: A Genius of Poetry*, Chapter 2: Love, Wine, Sodomy, and the Lash: pp29-73

How do Abu Nuwas' aesthetics compare to those in the texts we've read so far, and to those described by Sells? Is there a sacred/profane distinction, how do we know, and what does it matter?

4/19-21

1. Scheindlin: *Wine, Women, Death*: Introduction, pp 1-33

2. Scheindlin: Women: pp 77-134

3. Tova Rosen: "Veils and Wiles: Poetry as Woman," from *Unveiling Eve*, pp 64-82

Compare the Hebrew poems to the Arabic ones we've read so far. Compare their treatment of bodies and beauty. Upon what traditions do they draw, and what do they do with them?

4/26-8: Piyyut and Zohar

1. The Gazelle: Intro, pp33-105

How does the *piyyut* differ from the love poem? How do we know it's meant to be sacred? And is there a difference in the way these treat the created world?

2. From the *Zohar*: "Blessing, p 433

3. The Origin of the Soul and the Origin of the Body, pp778-82

4. Images of Man, pp 787-9

5. Melila on Literary Language and the *Zohar*

How does prayer work? How does the body signify?

5/3: Wrap-up: Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimlet: The Corporeal Turn

Capstone Project Day 2: One presentation

Papers due Monday, 5/10!

Assignment Guidelines

Seminar Papers: (20%)

These are meant to be the jumping-off point for your capstone papers. You may focus your capstone strictly on the assigned material, or you may want to focus on one of the contemporary manifestations of the problems it considers. When you present your seminar paper, add to it some of the perspective you intend to bring to your capstone project. You'll present your projects themselves on the days designated for that.

Preparing the Presentation:

A seminar paper is neither a research paper nor an essay, but a piece intended to introduce and provoke discussion. With that in mind,

- give your paper a clear structure. State its theme, make the central section easy to follow (you might bullet the main points), make the conclusion sharp and controversial when possible.
- Use a computer, and organize it for a presentation - you might number the paragraphs, for example, for reference during the discussion.
- stick to the topic. Do not give lots of detail and do not pad out a paper with irrelevancies. **DO NOT SUMMARIZE WHAT YOU HAVE READ.** Assume that all of us have read the piece and are familiar with the factual details of the topic.

REMEMBER: A seminar paper is neither a research paper nor an essay, and so need not be in narrative form. Its purposes are to prepare your readers in advance for a discussion, to guide them through a discussion, and to focus your thoughts for your presentation.

Annotated Bibliography (10%)

The bibliography should contain at least ten to fifteen sources, depending on your topic. It should contain a mix of primary sources, and secondary sources such as books, book chapters, and scholarly articles. Some of you will probably also use interviews as primary and secondary sources.

Paper abstract (5%)

This should be about 2-3 paragraphs in length, and it should state the argument you intend to make, its contributions to the field, and the sources you intend to use in the paper. In short it should answer the questions: The "what?" the "how?" and the "so what?"

Capstone (55%)

The final paper should be 20-25 pages long. It should be thematically related to material we've studied on this course. It may engage the literature we've studied, the theoretical models we've used to interpret it, or something related one or both of these two. While we are studying medieval materials here, you should feel free to write about contemporary issues that are thematically related.

Goals for the Paper:

- 1) write an essay that is clear, well-organized, and driven by a specific thesis relevant to the paper's topic.
- 2) effectively utilize primary and secondary source to develop the paper's argument
- 3) define and properly use technical terms and concepts
- 4) make distinctions between the presentation of relevant data and/or arguments made by others and the critical analysis of these materials.
- 5) accurately apply theoretical models and/or disciplinary methods to specialized content.