

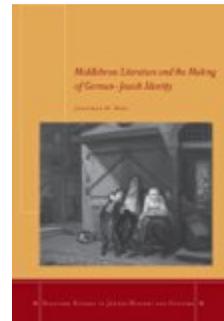


Jonathan M. Hess. *Middlebrow Literature and the Making of German-Jewish Identity*. Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture Series. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. xiii + 259 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-6122-2.

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Middlebrow German Literature

As German Jews, from the eighteenth century on, entered the world of German culture, they became strongly attached to the literature of the Enlightenment and classicism (Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Friedrich von Schiller, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe), which often expressed universal and humane ideals and were central to *Bildung* (cultivation). Indeed, as David Sorkin argued in a landmark work of scholarship (*The Transformation of German Jewry, 1780-1840* [1987]), their continuing attachment to *Bildung* while the Gentile society around them lowered its cultural standards made them, without realizing it, a distinctive subculture that was only nominally assimilated. Even granting this thesis, however, we cannot imagine that cultivated German Jews read only Goethe and Schiller. Handsome editions often gathered dust on bookshelves while their owners devoured the “middlebrow” literature that is the subject of this book. This vast body of non-canonical reading matter, much of it serialized or reviewed in the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* (General journal of Jewry, 1837-1922), was first explored by Hans Otto Horch in *Auf der Suche nach der jüdischen Erzählliteratur* (In search of Jewish narrative fiction, 1985). Since then, interest has grown in German-Jewish popular culture as opposed to *Bildung* (see, e.g., David A. Brenner, *German-Jewish Culture before the Holocaust: Kafka's Kitsch* [2008]).

This is the context for Jonathan M. Hess's welcome new study. Hess recognizes the need to complicate the outdated German binary distinction between “high” lit-

erature and *Trivialliteratur*. Middlebrow literature is situated between the two. It can exploit the clichés of melodramatic thrillers or sentimental romances. But it seeks more than ephemeral success; it may aim to educate and ennoble its readers; and so it often takes high literature as a reference point, adopting or criticizing familiar figures and episodes from William Shakespeare or Schiller. In doing so, it may also aim to create a national identity among its readers, making them feel part of an “imagined community” with a historical past open to interpretation.

Hess's approach is well illustrated by his first chapter, on the nineteenth-century German-Jewish historical novel. Following the success of *Die Marrannen* (The Marranos, 1837) by Phöbus Philippson (brother of Ludwig Philippson, founder-editor of the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*), such novels were often set among the crypto-Jews of medieval Spain. Marranos, who included famous poets, philosophers, and statesmen, provided modern Jews with an honorable ancestry, and gave examples of loyalty to Judaism under conditions of oppression that, it was imagined, would never return. Novels set in medieval Spain drew on the “black legend” of Spanish intolerance to supply thrills, while alluding to Walter Scott's Rebecca in *Ivanhoe* (1819) as an example of Jewish pride and implicitly criticizing her antithesis, Shakespeare's disloyal Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596). They often attained immense popularity and were translated into many languages. Yet they evaded the contradictions in their message. Jewish family life

was presented as an unalloyed idyll, and Jewish heroines who renounced their love for attractive Gentiles were praised as eternally chaste virgins (despite the unwanted implication that loyalty to Judaism meant sterile solitude). Hess handles these novels skillfully, treating them as seriously as they deserve, avoiding banal criticisms, acknowledging the contradictions they incur, and convincingly drawing out their ideological message.

While historical novels set among the Spanish Sephardim were read within the Jewish community, the “ghetto novel,” pioneered by Leopold Kompert, aimed to reach two audiences. In writing about the enclosed Jewish communities of Eastern Europe that were on the verge of dissolution, Kompert wanted to awake among his Jewish readers nostalgia for their own past and an appreciation of the often tragic conflict of tradition with modernity. Among his Gentile readers, he wanted to arouse sympathy for Jewish communal life and for the tragic isolation experienced by those who first broke away from it. Hess does justice to the complexity of Kompert’s best fiction, noting that, perhaps despite his intentions, his stories sometimes reveal “the vulnerability, potential barrenness, and the melancholy of Jewish life” (p. 86). One would like, though, to know more about Kompert’s relation to the nineteenth-century novelle, especially since the close of his once-famous story “Der Dorfgeher” (The village pedlar, 1851), “Und es war Alles, Alles gut” (And everything was all right—quoted p. 89), echoes that of Joseph von Eichendorff’s classic “Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts” (From the life of a good-for-nothing, 1826). Since Kompert was a highly visible author, Hess is able to explore his reception in considerable detail. His work was reviewed admiringly by the French critic Saint-René Taillandier, who classed it among the best of recent German literature, and it was widely translated. Its target audiences, however, were not quite so enthusiastic. Orthodox reviewers condemned his portrayal of ghetto life as too negative. Ludwig Philippson regretted that, unlike historical novelists, he failed to celebrate the grandeur of the Jewish past. Some liberal readers thought he presented a “strange” world of “mummified customs” (quoted p. 99). Many acknowledged his value as a cultural historian. But he does not seem to have succeeded in reaching non-Jewish readers.

The self-appointed guardians of Jewish literature, such as Ludwig Philippson, were ambivalent about another genre, that of romantic fiction. Continuing the eighteenth-century polemic against undisciplined reading, they denounced such books as inducing the spiritual

equivalent of curvature of the spine. Yet Philippson also tried to appropriate romance for improving purposes, always ensuring that love culminated in marriage and domestic bliss. The most interesting writer discussed in this chapter is Rahel Meyer, who moved in literary circles in Vienna and later in Berlin. Her novel *Zwei Schwestern* (Two sisters, 1853) undermines the myth of domestic happiness by telling how one sister marries a Christian and dies early, whereupon the other, horrified by this betrayal of Judaism, accepts the marriage arranged by her parents with a philistine, and is miserable. Literature is naturally subversive: it questions and undercuts the simplistic ideologies for which people try to instrumentalize it. By that standard, the fiction of orthodoxy discussed in Hess’s final chapter is barely literature. He reveals a lost continent of fiction which tried to show that orthodox Judaism was compatible with modern Western culture. This genre was founded by Sara Hirsch Guggenheim, daughter of the leading neoorthodox rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. To enforce its message that orthodoxy is the key to happy family life, it defines itself against the classics of high culture, deploring the temptations to immorality offered by Heinrich Heine and Schiller, and isolating itself firmly from the literary mainstream. Yet this literature was widely read; some of it is still available; and, as Hess notes in his epilogue, there are present-day bestsellers which similarly use exciting plots to show that orthodoxy can survive modernity.

Hess’s original scholarship not only charts several forgotten landscapes of German-Jewish fiction but also suggests some qualifications to Sorkin’s thesis that nineteenth-century German Jews embraced *Bildung* and failed to realize that they still formed a subculture. Since Kompert consciously sought to report on specifically Jewish conflicts, he and his readers realized that their literature was distinctive, and so did the orthodox novelists who thought they were producing something morally, and therefore aesthetically, superior to the literature of *Bildung*. Hess has given us new access to the imaginative world and the self-understanding of the nineteenth-century German-Jewish public. His discussion of literary texts is astute and sensitive, and refrains from belittling them, while his account of their reception saves his interpretations from seeming simply the speculations of a modern critic. His book is strikingly well written (except when he uses “provenance” for “province” and has someone “pouring” over papers [pp. 130, 143]), and is marred only by the lack of a bibliography. Altogether it is an important and original contribution to our understanding of Jewish culture in nineteenth-century Germany.

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