Far from Innocents Abroad: Jews through the Eyes of English Travel Writers

Despite their absence from England (with some rare exceptions) between the time of their expulsion in 1290 to their gradual (re)denization in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Jews resisted full erasure from the English imagination, emerging at key moments and in influential texts to complicate and inflect developing notions of Englishness. The last several decades have seen an abundance of studies by literary critics and cultural historians examining various facets of these representations of Jews and Judaism in early modern English writings. Eva Johanna Holmberg’s *Jews in the Early Modern English Imagination* is among the most recent contributions to this growing body of scholarship.

Most earlier studies on this subject have been devoted to the realms of literary expression (dramatic texts and poetry) or religious discourse and polemic. Holmberg seeks to distinguish her work from previous efforts by focusing her attention on the travel writings of Englishmen reporting their observations from their time spent on the Continent, the Levant, and the extensive reaches of the Ottoman Empire. As she notes in her introduction, these English writers were eager to observe the living conditions, practices, and appearances of Jews in their homes and communities. Yet despite their claims to veracity, their reports of these observations were inevitably informed by—even as they were constitutive of—imaginative constructions of and preconceptions about these religious and cultural Others. Holmberg wisely reminds us that we cannot take these writings at face value, as evidence of the actual situations of actual Jews, as they reflect early modern English structures of thinking with and about Jews.

Holmberg approaches her analysis through three aspects of these English travel writings about Jews: place, practice, and appearance. Consecutive chapters take up the representations of Jews within their geographical locations and dispositions within their (mostly) urban environments, in terms of their rituals and customs, and by way of their physical characteristics and (typically exotic) dress. These are useful categories of analysis, closely resembling modern modes of anthropological and ethnographic description. Indeed, Holmberg considers the relationship between our modern (ostensibly highly self-conscious) ethnographies and these early modern predecessors in some preliminary methodological comments in her introduction. She attempts to make the case that the motives of these travel writers—to collect practical information rather than explicitly to argue against Jews and Judaism—keep their texts from being polemical. I find such a distinction to be unpersuasive and it is an analytical weakness that reflects the shortcomings of the ensuing analysis.

The book’s greatest strengths are in the diversity and range of materials it brings together, which includes both the better-known travel narratives by Thomas Coryate, Fynes Moryson, Thomas Nashe, Samuel Purchas, and others, and lesser-studied tracts not often associated with
or read in the context of English representations of Jews. Each chapter collates a variety of observations about Jews in their local habitats, dressing and behaving in ways that these Englishmen found worthy of remark. But in her amalgamation of this impressive array of materials, the specificity of their distinctive orientations and precise historical contexts get lost. England of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was the site of extraordinarily volatile changes in economy, culture, politics, and religion. To write about Jews in the late Elizabethan period meant something very different than to write about Jews in the middle of the English Civil Wars or Interregnum period. To write about Jews from the perspective of a supporter of the Church of England would have led to very different views than to write about Jews from the perspective of a more radical Protestant. If Holmberg is correct to insist that these writings say more about the English imaginary than they do about Jews, as she surely is, then it should follow that the historian and critic must be attentive to the pivotal shifts and shaping forces that would have constituted a very different set of informing concerns and pressures on that imaginary at different moments in time and across different religious, political, or social affiliations. And yet the reader is repeatedly frustrated by the lack of sufficient contextualization and nuanced interpretation.

Time and again, what Holmberg offers is uncritical and largely under-theorized description, without attention to the historical or political stakes. A striking early example occurs in her second chapter, “Locating the Jews.” Holmberg takes note of the repeated characterization by some English travelers of the Jewish quarters as “seraglios” (an Ottoman term for the enclosed living quarters for wives and concubines). She dutifully observes the way in which such a term (and others, like “cloister” or “college”) was associated with enclosed and restricted spaces, homogenous in their occupants. And yet Holmberg is stunningly unwilling to examine the sexual politics of this identification, losing a significant opportunity to consider the ways in which Jewishness is often gendered (usually to its detriment) in early modernity. The missed opportunity is further underscored by her citation of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, in which the prioress describes the Jewish ghetto as being structured so that “thurgh the strete myghte ride or wende. / For it was free and open at eyther ende” (p. 29). The carnal connotations of such free access “at eyther ende” are quite clear and speak directly to the sexualizing and feminizing of Jews throughout the medieval and early modern periods (not to mention well into the modern era). But all of this goes unremarked by Holmberg, whose method is to list, catalog, and describe, rather than to analyze or interpret.

A heavy reliance on passive constructions in this book contributes further to the weakness of its efforts at argument. In chapter 4, “Framing Jewish Bodies and Souls,” for example, Holmberg writes, “Blackness of skin could be explained in early modern culture by means of many theories. It could be seen as a sign of sinfulness or as resulting from the scorching effects of the sun.” But without any active subject attached to these acts of perception, the reader is left with little if any deeper understanding of the stakes in construing Jews as black. This paragraph concludes with the disappointingly unhelpful observation, “‘blackness’ could mean almost anything…. There were many shades of Jews” (p. 118). It betrays Holmberg’s unwillingness to push beyond mere description and to offer an analysis of the Jewish characterizations she has catalogued and to show how they are rooted in the particular historical and individual social, cultural, and religious circumstances of the agents responsible for these descriptions.

In the end, Holmberg’s study invites an assessment similar to that of the travel narratives she analyzes. With all its fascinating descriptions and tantalizing details, organized schematically and topically, it will certainly be of some interest to scholars and students of the period. It is likely also to leave the reader wanting more from these descriptions in the way of penetrating interpretation and comprehensive contextualization.

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