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Review:

Why Harry Met Sally: Subversive Jewishness, Anglo-Christian Power, and the Rhetoric of Modern Love, Joshua Louis Moss
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Why Harry Met Sally: Subversive Jewishness, Anglo-Christian Power, and the Rhetoric of Modern Love, Joshua Louis Moss (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), ISBN 978-1-4773-1282-7, pp. 360, \$90.

A student walks into my office, sees this book on my desk, and asks, “*Why Harry Met Sally?*” She knows that the title of the 1989 movie with Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan begins with “when”, not “why”. Hence, she is confused, especially since one does not usually ask “why” in the case of stories of romantic meetings. One is more likely to ask “how” or, as in the case of Nora Ephron’s title, “when” did you meet? I explain to the student that in this study of prominent Christian-Jewish historical, literary, and filmic couplings from the nineteenth century to the present, the “why” of the match – its social and cultural rationale and effect – is precisely the point.

The blurb on the back of the book suggests that in the Jewish-Christian couplings that have been a staple of popular culture since the late nineteenth century, the unruly “Jew is the privileged representative of progressivism, secular modernism, and the cosmopolitan sensibilities of the mass-media age”, while the quieter, more conventional Anglo-Christian partner serves as a medium of cultural containment or moderation. The “why” behind these recurrent couplings, then, is to effect and mark cultural-historical transformations without letting them run roughshod.

This is an elegant formulation, but it does not entirely do justice to the extensive, multigenerational, multidisciplinary survey of Jewish-Christian couplings offered in this book. To begin with, neither of the two historical couplings analysed in the opening section, those of the nineteenth-century British writer, dandy, and eventual Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, and of the high-ranking French military officer and falsely accused traitor Alfred Dreyfus, conform to this model. Disraeli was not actually Jewish, having been baptized at the age of twelve. His marriage to the flamboyant Anglo-Saxon widow Mary Anne Lewis, twelve years his senior, did not serve to moderate his own theatricality, though it did solidify Disraeli’s rejection of natal Jewishness and smooth his transition into political life. As for Dreyfus, the point Moss makes about him and his marriage to Lucie Hadamard is that unlike Disraeli, Dreyfus chose to marry another proud assimilated Jew and not a Christian. The

Dreyfus story thus reveals a disturbing paradox about Jewish couplings in late nineteenth-century, resurgently antisemitic Europe. On the one hand, if Dreyfus had truly and fully assimilated and taken a Christian wife, he would have been perceived by the antisemites as sexually violating the nation state. On the other hand, in deciding to marry an unapologetically Jewish woman, Dreyfus became suspect of even greater disloyalty. As such, Disraeli's and Dreyfus's marriages serve as antithetical models of modern Jewish coupling, Disraeli's marriage exemplifying a transcultural, cosmopolitan, fully secular modernism and Dreyfus's the reactionary rejection thereof.

Moss frames his analysis of these and many other Jewish-Christian marriages in life, literature, and on screen in terms of what he calls "coupling theory". Instead of examining isolated individuals as agents of modernity and transformation, he considers the "imagined couple as a privileged rhetorical nexus" insofar as the couple is precursor to the family that, in turn, serves as an extension of the nation (p. 7). Analysing Jewish-Christian couplings at various stages of modernity in Europe and America, as seen in diverse works of literature, stage, and film, thus becomes a way of gauging the progress of modernism or, in some instances, the backlashes against it. At various points in the oscillating stages mapped out in this book, Moss identifies acceptance, even celebration, of obviously marked Jewish-Christian unions; at other points he sees a retreat from marked ethnicity and inter-ethnic coupling in favour of more coded, subtle forms of cultural mixing. In keeping with the broad scope of the study, which covers more than a century and includes material from England, Ireland, France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, and America, Moss broadens the Jewish-Christian "coupling" category to include other kinds of imagined hybrids too, such as Walter Benjamin's fantasy, in his 1931 essay "On Hashish", of being transformed into a "mouse-mountain", or Kafka's depiction of a talking, educated ape in his 1917 story, "A Report to the Academy". Similarly wide is Moss's definition of Jewishness, which assumes explicit as well as implicit forms, including coded language, vocal tones, hand gestures, and forms of comedy, what Joseph Litvak terms "comicosmopolitanism". According to this broader definition of Jewishness, which relies on an active, comprehending spectator familiar with the codes, one can discern various instances of "Jewishness without Jewishness" in an array of works of American popular culture. In these coded forms of Jewishness, too, Moss identifies interesting hybridizations with coded Anglo-Christianity or "Christonormativity".

The almost encyclopedic scope and breadth of the book constitutes its major strength. One cannot help but be impressed by the range of material covered, including readings of Christian-Jewish couplings or coded hybrids in the work of such major writers as Disraeli, Sholem Aleichem, Proust, Joyce, Hemingway, Kafka, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Israel Zangwill, Henry Roth, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, and Art Spiegelman, not to mention a huge array of films and television shows from the mid-twentieth century to the present moment. This extensive reach allows Moss to sketch out several salient historical periods of Anglo-Christian couplings that come and go in the form of what he terms the First, Second, and Third Waves. In the First Wave, which includes such films as *The Cohens and the Kellys* (1926), *The Jazz Singer* (1927), and *Abie's Irish Rose* (1928), Hollywood is seen as championing Christian-Jewish love and, by extension, celebrating pro-immigrant politics and the advances of the technological age. This period is followed by several antisemitic, reactionary decades, beginning with the stock market crash of 1929 and continuing through the anti-Communist 1950s, during which overt Jewishness generally disappears from sight on page and screen. Although Disraeli and Dreyfus even appear in films during this period (*The Prime Minister*, 1941, and *The Life of Emile Zola*, 1937), they do so with little to no overt reference to issues of Jewish concern. A resurgence in unapologetic Anglo-Christian-Jewish screen couplings occurs during the Second Wave (1967–80), characterized by a complement of raunchy, sexually provocative stand-up comedians and critically lauded American Jewish writers (Bellow, Roth, Malamud, Singer) who highlight the American Jewish experience, Jewish neurosis, compulsive sexuality, and the breakdown of the nuclear family. Moss also takes into account the impact of the Six Day War of 1967 in reshaping Jewishness from an exilic identity to one of national and military power and pride. According to Moss, this second stage of unapologetic erotic Jewish schlemiels or nebbishes mating with Anglo-Saxon love interests, a counter-cultural corrective to the political conservatism of the 1950s as seen in such films as *The Graduate* (1967) and *The Way We Were* (1973), is eventually tamped down by the resurgent conservatism of the Reagan era. In this period, as in the 1950s, overt Jewishness, generally speaking, goes into hiding but still emerges in coded forms in such films as *When Harry Met Sally*, where Harry is presented as a familiar neurotic, hypervocal, and hypersexual (read, Jewish) character who eventually marries blonde, blue-eyed, tighter-laced Sally. This repression or coding of Jewishness is, in turn, countered by

an end-of-the-millennium Third Wave that includes several instances of explicit Christian-Jewish couplings on small and large screen, this time with certain queer subversions as well, in such television shows and films as *Roseanne*, *Dharma & Greg*, *Will and Grace*, *The Nanny*, *Meet the Parents*, and *Angels in America*. Jill Soloway's Amazon series, *Transparent*, which combines explicit Jewishness, variant sexuality, and Christian-Jewish coupling, represents the apex of this Third Wave.

The encyclopaedic, schematic breadth of the book also constitutes its principal weakness, however. Moss basically sprints from one historical stage and from one cluster of significant works to the next, in some instances dizzyingly jumping back and forth between periods without advance warning, generally offering little in the way of close reading or sustained analysis of any particular work. When one considers just how much has been written about any number of the authors featured in the study – Joyce, Kafka, Bellow, and Roth, to name just a few – one cannot help but feel that the consideration of their work to sketch out the relevant historical time periods is simply too cursory to do any of it justice. Here and there, this cursory survey-style approach results in factual errors. For example, Moss introduces Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye's Daughters* (in any case the title not of the Yiddish original but of a 1949 translation) as "a collection of 1890s short stories from Russian Jewish author Sholem Aleichem". The stories were in fact published between 1894, when the author was still living in Russia, and 1914, when Aleichem had already immigrated into the United States. Moss also mistakenly notes that in the original collection, Chava's Gentile husband Chvedka is revealed to be a violent alcoholic, a feature not actually of the original novel but of later stage and film adaptations. Occasionally, Moss makes big assertions about major authors without quoting or analysing even a single passage from their work. With regard to Bellow's *Herzog*, for example, Moss contends that "[l]ike Proust and Kafka before him, Bellow produced this subjectivity by hybridizing conflicting understandings and perspectives across a Christian Jewish divide" (p. 129), a statement that would take on greater meaning if it were offered in the context of an in-depth, scholarly analysis of any of these major writers' writings. The result is a book that touches on a great number of works, identifies interesting historical periods and trends that in some instances are contradicted by counter-examples, but that stops short of offering any extended interpretation or close reading. The best moments of the book are those that delve into Christian-Jewish couplings in mainstream films and television shows, as

these are less commonly written about or analysed in academic contexts. The discussion of Robert Redford's passive WASP character and Barbara Streisand's aggressive Jewishness in Sidney Pollack's *The Way We Were* (1973) in terms of the conflict between political activism and creative cowardice is one such moment. All in all, *Why Harry Met Sally* makes an important contribution to film and television history and is a valuable resource insofar as it points to just about every significant American film, Broadway show, and television show engaging the themes of Christian-Jewish coupling and links them to a broader literary history of this theme. It will be the task of subsequent scholars to probe some of the categories laid out here and nuance them with greater detail and analysis.

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