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Review:

***The Christian Jew and the Unmarked Jewess: The Polemics of Sameness in Medieval English Anti-Judaism*, Adrienne Williams Boyarin**

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The Christian Jew and the Unmarked Jewess: The Polemics of Sameness in Medieval English Anti-Judaism, Adrienne Williams Boyarin (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), ISBN 978-0812252590, pp. 352, \$79.95.

“For in every town, at least in most parts, Jews act just like Christians.” These words, drawn from the Jewish pietist guide *Sefer Hasidim* (late twelfth to early thirteenth century), emphasize the fact that differences between medieval Jews and Christians were rarely obvious or visible. Adrienne Williams Boyarin uses this quotation as the epigraph to her new book, alongside words taken from a Christian source, the Fourth Lateran Council. The canon that demanded Jews wear a distinguishing badge or clothing item expressed concern that “Confusion has developed to such a degree that no difference is discernible.” Together, these two quotations epitomize the crucial historiographical intervention Boyarin seeks to make: whereas many studies of medieval Jews have focused on difference, Boyarin in this work explores “realities and fantasies of sameness” (p. 1). She is hardly the first to acknowledge the realities of sameness; many scholars have remarked on the fact that Jews and Christians could not necessarily be easily distinguished from one another in medieval city streets. However, studies of Christian anti-Judaism have not yet deeply engaged with fantasies of sameness – especially those involving Jewish men.

The role of gender, emphasized in the title, is central to the book and part of what distinguishes Boyarin’s work from previous scholarship. In a 2008 essay, Sara Lipton asked in her title the important and provocative question: “Where are the Gothic Jewish women?” In this essay and subsequent work, Lipton set up a gendered contrast that thus far has been largely accepted in the scholarship on medieval anti-Judaism. On the one hand, visual and verbal polemics highlighted and physically distinguished the marked Jewish man. Visual artists, in particular, employed both bodily and sartorial signifiers to identify men as Jewish: large, hooked noses, darkened skin, distinctive pointed hats. On the other hand, the Jewish woman remained unmarked. She was often less prominently featured in textual polemics and more rarely targeted by real-life anti-Jewish accusations. In medieval visual culture, Jewish women often appear virtually indistinguishable from Christian women; only context allows

viewers to identify them as Jewish.

Boyarin offers a fresh approach to the apparent contrast between marked Jewish men and unmarked Jewish women. While preserving the valuable concept of marking Jewishness as fundamentally gendered, she challenges the established historiography in two significant ways. First, she explores how literary and legal sources – in contrast, perhaps, to visual material – engage with the “sameness” of Jewish men. Medieval English texts, Boyarin argues, express awareness (and anxiety) that Jewish men cannot in fact be visually distinguished from Christian men, and blur boundaries between Christian and Jewish men. Christian polemics also employed concepts of sameness as a means of supersessionist appropriation: the best Jew is, in fact, a Christian. Second, she offers a new reading on the “unmarked Jewess”, which emphasizes the polemical function of that figure. Textual sources, she argues, demonstrate that the Jewish woman is not always or necessarily represented as unmarked due to a sense that she is feminine rather than Jewish, or that she is a malleable figure who is particularly susceptible to Christian influence and easily incorporated post-conversion into the Christian community. Rather, authors place the “unmarked Jewess” in “a doubled and ambiguous space designed to engage notions of Christian Jewishness” (p. 7). At times, the unmarked nature of the Jewish woman renders her dangerous: her ability to pass as Christian, in some narratives, enables her to enact violence against Christian victims.

The book is divided into two parts. The first explores the idea of “sameness” and its interpretive potential in the figure of the Jewish man. Boyarin focuses on texts that have not typically been read as anti-Jewish polemics but that reveal a polemic and supersessionist use of discourses of sameness. Part II turns to the figure of the “unmarked Jewess” and explores a variety of examples of the polemical use of the indistinguishable Jewish woman. Each of the two parts begin with what Boyarin terms *historiae*: narrative discussions of examples of Jewish men or women made narratively like the Christians around them. These narratives, and the chapters that follow them, weave together examples from literary sources with those from archival legal materials, thus emphasizing how those, too, function as constructed narratives. The first recounts the stories of a Jewish man who dressed as a friar in 1277, allegedly to mislead Christians through blasphemous preaching, and a boy in thirteenth-century Norwich whose identity as a Jew or Christian

remained ambiguous and contested. Both cases explore the difficulties of distinguishing between Jews and Christians, and the efforts (not necessarily successful) to rely on their differentiated genitalia. The second pairs a real Anglo-Jewish woman who converted to Christianity in thirteenth-century Worcester with a sinister fictional Jewish woman who helped her brother cover up an imagined ritual murder in Bristol. In both the real story and the fictional one, Boyarin argues, the Jewish woman's "sameness is the polemical caricature that emerges. The mark that the Jewess bears in Anglo-Christian literature is, precisely, her *lack of marking*" (p. 111).

Throughout the book, Boyarin clearly and consistently emphasizes that sameness is not philosemitism but rather very much an element of polemical anti-Judaism. Texts that focus on the sameness of Jewish men either expose anxieties about the inability to distinguish Jews from Christians or embrace sameness with overtly appropriative and supersessionist goals. These texts represent "a powerful (Christian) urge to identification, self-actualization, and mimicry" (p. 91). Jewish men are like Christian men, or Christian men mimic Jewish men, because Christians have replaced Jews. They are now, thus, better Jews than the Jews themselves. Nor is the unmarked Jewish woman necessarily passive or an especially good candidate for conversion. Rather, in Boyarin's reading, she becomes "not merely a foil for the dangerous male Jew but a strategically placed tool of misdirection, a polemical embodiment of the Christian problem of continuity and identification with the Jew" (pp. 113–14). Her very indistinguishability renders her a potentially dangerous figure.

Boyarin's work offers a valuable alternative reading of discourses of difference and sameness in medieval Christian anti-Jewish polemic. While the book is often literary in focus, Boyarin finds intriguing ways to incorporate archival sources and explore how the same discourses are at work in court records and contracts. As a result, the book has much to offer for both literary scholars and historians interested in topics linked to gender, Jewish history, and anti-Judaism and antisemitism. The book also includes an appendix with hitherto untranslated sources, potentially useful for both research and teaching purposes. Boyarin's exclusive focus on English material does raise questions about the extent to which her conclusions can be usefully applied elsewhere in Western Europe: the history of English Jews, and English Christians' relationship to their

Jewish community (both present and absent), differ markedly from other regional histories. Hopefully, however, the book will inspire thought-provoking new questions on whether such “polemics of sameness” are at work, and how, in sources from other regional contexts.

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