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REVIEW ESSAY

“Before *Fiddler on the Roof*, before *The Jazz Singer*, there was *Deborah*”

LARS FISCHER

Deborah and Her Sisters: How One Nineteenth-Century Melodrama and a Host of Celebrated Actresses Put Judaism on the World Stage, Jonathan M. Hess (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), ISBN 978-0-812-24958-3, pp. 272, \$49.95.

Rarely has the contention that we have been robbed of an important scholar who, at the time of his death, was at the height of his powers held as true as it does in the case of Jonathan M. Hess, who died suddenly on 9 April 2018 at the age of only fifty-two. The volume under review, published just a few months prior to his death, impressively showcases his considerable abilities and sensibilities as a cultural historian. The occasional swagger of his presentation notwithstanding, the depth and savvy of his engagement with the archival material and his ingenuity in contextualizing and conceptualizing it are never in doubt.

Hess charts the fate of Salomon Hermann Mosenthal’s melodrama *Deborah* and its various adaptations and permutations on both sides of the Atlantic, paying considerable attention to the varying ways in which a number of prominent actresses (including Fanny Janauschek, Kate Bateman, and Sarah Bernhardt) made the melodrama their own and it, in turn, helped shape their careers. First performed in Hamburg in 1849, it was both “one of the most commercially successful German plays of the era” (p. 6) and “one of the German-speaking world’s most prominent cultural exports in the latter half of the nineteenth century” (p. 66), creating a veritable “*Deborah* cult” (p. 67). Put differently: “Before *Fiddler on the Roof*, before *The Jazz Singer*, there was *Deborah*” (p. 6).

At the heart of his account lies what might seem an intriguing paradox. “In an era that witnessed the rise of new forms of political and racial antisemitism”, Hess explains, “weeping over *Deborah*’s . . . woes gave theater audiences a pleasurable way of experiencing and celebrating their

own liberal-mindedness". In other words, the play served "as a vehicle for unleashing liberal feelings of compassion" (p. 7). Yet it is equally clear, as Hess points out, that the melodrama also "trafficked in stereotypes". He points specifically to the stereotypical presentation of "passionate and beautiful Jewish women, of vengeful Jewish men, of Jewish suffering as the ideal theatrical spectacle, and of Judaism as a disruptive force" (p. 10). "Ambivalence about Jews", as he puts it, "was no stranger to the *Deborah* phenomenon" (p. 10). Some readers may be tempted to consider this something of an understatement, not least given that in most of its guises the melodrama also presented the death and/or departure of (the) Jews as its principal mode of redemption.

"Over the course of its first three acts", Hess explains, "*Deborah* presents its protagonist both as an ideal object of a new form of secular compassion and a source of terror threatening to destroy the Christian world", treating the audience, not least, to an "extravagant performance of Old Testament vengeance" (p. 53). At a crucial juncture in the subsequent unfolding of the play, *Deborah* "hardly figures as an object of identification whose victimhood provokes compassion. Rather, it is *Deborah* who needs to be taught sympathy here" (p. 56). "The fact that she and her fellow Jews are headed off for America at precisely the moment when the Christian villagers are ready to accept them", Hess suggests, "further underscores the utopian nature of this project, placing the audience, once again, into the familiar tearjerking position of wishing for the elusive happy end" (p. 59). On Hess's reading, "the audience here wishes not for two lovers from different worlds to be united against all odds but for the realization of a political order grounded in the secular model of compassion that allows the Jews and Christians in the drama to reconcile . . . the reconciliation here is mediated entirely by the spectators, whose tears express both their own powerlessness and the fantasy that tears shed in the theater might somehow herald the beginning of a new political order in which Jews and Christians might live together as equals" (p. 60). This is fine as far it goes but it is hardly the whole story. Not least, there is surely something rather facile and well and truly ambivalent about tearing up as a result of one's readiness to accept people whom one will fortunately not be compelled actually to accept after all (since they are leaving). Hess is in fact aware of the drawbacks of this sort of "feel-good universalism", adding that *Deborah* "could nurture liberal political fantasies and promote smugness at one and the same time" (p. 60). He develops this line of thought slightly more fully in his subsequent discussion of one of the principal American

adaptations of *Deborah*, Augustin Daly's *Leah, the Forsaken*. Daly's *Leah*, he writes, "domesticates Mosenthal's *Deborah*, making it a drama that teaches American Christians to confront the brutality of their own past with its Puritan-like fanaticism and intolerance. . . . In this way, Daly's *Leah* promoted an even greater level of smugness and complacency" (p. 81). Moreover, Daly "structured the entire final act of *Leah* around the conflict between the Jewish apostate's paranoid persecution of Jews and the (Christian) spirit of reconciliation". This not only allowed him to treat the audience to "the thrill of one final performance of Jewish vengeance" (pp. 82–3), but also means, as Hess points out, that "'Christian love and forbearance' work best, it seems, when Jews are taken out of the picture" (p. 85). (It is not entirely clear to me why Hess assumes this latter aspect to be so much more pronounced in Daly's *Leah* than in Mosenthal's original.) All the same, this is clearly not where Hess's interest lies. After all, "ambivalence about Jews was no stranger to European and North American liberalism in the nineteenth century" (p. 85) and therefore, the implication seems to be, merits little attention.

Hess (twice) quotes a reference to the melodrama published in a New York weekly, *The Jewish Messenger*, on 22 April 1892, which characterizes its main protagonist as a "Jewess whose woes have made a million weep without effecting any special reduction in the amount of prejudice vented against the race in actuality" (pp. 11, 157). Hess himself is clearly not content with this assessment but for obvious reasons also has a hard time dismissing it. It is to his credit that, for the most part, he allows the complexity of the material to prevail, and we owe some of his most probing and productive observations and insights to his determination not to settle for obvious easy answers.

There is, for instance, Hess's emphasis on the fact that Mosenthal's *Deborah* and its various adaptations and permutations were conceived not as ideological statements but as money-spinning melodramas tapping into a well established "commerce in tears" (p. 31). "Much of the piggybacking on the *Deborah* and *Leah* craze was", he observes, "facilitated by a lack of international copyright" (p. 69). Likewise, he notes that "*Deborah*'s loss of popularity around 1900 had less to do with the rise of antisemitism than with new models of the theater" (p. 162). Ingenious too is his discussion of the varying ways in which a number of prominent actresses appropriated the play and his attention to a theatre-going culture in which, due to their "grand emotional performance, the actress surpasses the playwright, establishing herself as the true artist to be

revered" (p. 128); in which "enjoying the wonders of impersonation and the stage personality of the female artist simultaneously did not constitute a paradox" (p. 116); and in which "through the ritual of 'vociferous applause,' theatergoers participate in the performance, disrupting the illusion as they acknowledge their enjoyment of it" (p. 15).

The "feel-good universalism" at the heart of the "Deborah cult" is indeed an important phenomenon. Hess has done a great job of throwing it into relief and is entirely right in insisting that these "feelings of righteousness . . . deserve to be taken seriously" (p. 35). I would go further and add that we dismiss them at our peril. It is indeed of enormous significance "that the affective communities forged through crying" over this melodrama "celebrated identification with Jewishness as the ultimate liberal experience" (pp. 206–7). Yet what exactly does this imply? "There are undoubtedly still those", Hess goes on, "who would insist on regarding this shared experience of melodramatic Jewishness with suspicion, stressing its inauthenticity and forcing it into the shadow of the antisemitism that it challenged. In following this path, we make a grievous error" (p. 207). It seems, then, that, as far as the non-Jews' attitudes are concerned, we are confronted with that most non-postmodern phenomenon of a clear-cut binary: our conceptual options are unqualified liberal anti-antisemitism, on the one hand, and antisemitism, on the other, the underlying assumption being that "ambivalence" towards Jews and the considerable areas of overlap between the content of this "ambivalence" and outright antisemitism do not draw the substance of liberal anti-antisemitism into question.

Hess's insistence that the "feelings of righteousness" unleashed by Deborah "deserve to be taken seriously" takes us to the heart of recent discussions about the phenomenon of "philosemitism", which Hess celebrates at length in the increasingly rhapsodic final part of his book. I think it is fair to say that most scholars in the field would now agree that non-Jews have frequently, to varying degrees, been conflicted and rarely entirely negative in their attitudes towards Jews (nor, alternatively, entirely free of negative attitudes towards them). Nor can there be any doubt that the negative attitudes have generally received rather more scholarly attention than their positive competitors. A number of scholars have proceeded in recent years to enrich the bigger picture by giving more positive sentiments their due. There is also, however, a tendency to play these positive attitudes off against the negative ones, implying that the former more or less invariably blossomed to eradicate the latter. Yet

positive encounters with Jews (real or imagined) have had (and in some cases still have) an enormous potential to generate subsequent regret, embarrassment, feelings of guilt, and the desire to compensate for one's temporary lapse in judgement, sometimes more or less instantly, in other cases over time. What the study of "philosemitism" surely illustrates above all is how little even quite significant positive attitudes and encounters were ultimately able to achieve against their negative counterparts and a deeply rooted social and cultural predisposition towards antisemitism. The celebration of "identification with Jewishness as the ultimate liberal experience" can easily, as we know only too well, turn out to be a liability rather than a blessing. Hess has done an exemplary job of providing us with a snapshot, as it were, of a constellation that bore within it possibilities that ultimately came to fruition, if at all, only in rather mediated and roundabout ways, and it is important to keep this in perspective.

When it comes to the Jews, in contrast, Hess takes us into post-binary territory. He indicates at the outset that he intends to approach his object of study as an expression of "a shared culture of representing and experiencing Jewishness among Jews and non-Jews" (p. 16), focusing especially on "the role of interactions between Jews and non-Jews in producing Jewishness" and adopting Steve Aschheim's concept of "co-constitutionality" (p. 20). While the fact that Mosenthal was himself a Jew (as, of course, was Sarah Bernhardt) offers an obvious point of departure for considerations along these lines, Hess focuses primarily on the shared experience of Jewish and non-Jewish theatre-goers. "Philosemitism", he suggests, "was not merely part of the play's content. *Deborah* helped create social spaces where Jews and Christians came together, sitting side by side to enjoy a Jewish play" (p. 178). Indeed, on his reading, "performances of *Deborah* and *Leah* . . . gave rise to a type of philosemitic liberalism that was frequently a Jewish and non-Jewish coproduction and, as such, arguably one of the most significant Jewish cultural events of the nineteenth century" (p. 163). For Jews, Hess argues, "participating in this popular cultural phenomenon meant being a part of a transnational community of sentimental compassion that they themselves decisively helped form, a community they helped shape as both subjects and objects" (p. 195).

Now, there is obviously no denying that on a purely descriptive and empirical level one can indeed argue that everyone involved in a particular constellation co-constitutes that constellation. The potentially problematic normative and ethical implications this raises instantly become clear when one takes the assumption to its merciless

logical consequence: the Jews gassed in the Nazi death camps also “co-constituted” the death camps. One does not need to resort to fanciful assumptions about authenticity or even touch on the widespread phenomenon of identification with the oppressor to take into account the strong formative influence that societies and cultures exert on everyone within their reach. While this brings with it a substantial measure of internalization, and here the notion of “co-constitution” may be useful, it is surely also accurate to say that most people spend a fair amount of their time accommodating themselves to circumstances they may not (entirely) like but consider unalterable or even appreciate, as far as they go, because they are at least better than they were or could be worse. I am sure that to this day the number of women or black people who “co-constitute” cinema audiences giggling at stupid sexist or racist jokes is considerable. I myself have “co-constituted” audiences amused by the lamest of anti-gay stereotypes or, perhaps more importantly, found myself genuinely moved, regardless of what I knew were ridiculously melodramatic plot lines, by the fact that I was at least seeing gay people on screen at all. So I readily acknowledge that all this is by no means (necessarily or exclusively) just a matter of more or less conscious or intentional opportunism.

I recently watched the award-winning film *3 Days in Quiberon*, which offers a fictional account of the circumstances surrounding the last major interview the great actress Romy Schneider gave, not long before her death, while staying at a spa in Quiberon. In it, she enthusiastically anticipates acting in what turned out to be her final film, *La passante du Sans-Souci* (1982). I recall seeing this film as a pretty green school-leaver fairly soon after it came out and finding it both profoundly moving and oddly satisfying. I found it profoundly moving because (for me) it ultimately owed its emotive punch to the way the Shoah featured in its plot, and I found it oddly satisfying because the film’s main Nazi protagonist gets his come-uppance, belated as it may be. Wind forward a couple of decades, I am now (I hope) a tad less green, hold a doctorate in history, and count the Shoah and Germany’s postwar dealings with its Nazi past among my specialisms. Full of nostalgic enthusiasm, I acquired a DVD of *La passante du Sans-Souci* only to find that the film is so cringe-inspiringly awful and instrumentalizes the Holocaust in so undignified a manner that I cannot bring myself to watch the whole film. As one subsequent reviewer put it, the film presents a “melodramatic love story with political references which seems rather contrived and utilizes the Nazi past it conjures up as a nostalgically tinged period setting”. At the time, I had never heard of the

Holocaust mini-series nor, should it have made an impact on anyone I knew, was I privy to this fact. By pure chance, I had stumbled across a copy of Peter Weiss's *The Investigation* in mid-puberty. I could afford it because it was (where else?) in the bargain bin. For reasons I cannot to this day explain and which are all the more unfathomable, given that Weiss systematically erased the Jewishness of the victims, the Shoah has been an intense obsession of mine ever since. If anyone around me at the time shared this preoccupation, they never told me so. Put simply, for my young self, the fact that the Shoah – as opposed to the Germans' own suffering at the hands of the Nazis; for anyone who needs to be reminded of this crucial distinction, Robert Moeller's essay, "War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany", published in the *American Historical Review* in 1996, is still a great point of departure – featured at all in a "real" film running in a "real" cinema, and, perhaps even more impressively, shown on actual, official television (in both German states, incidentally, though I did not know this at the time) was simply so remarkable that it would never even have entered my mind to wonder about the quality or integrity of the presentation. To be sure, had I lived in a big city where more was on offer, had I had parents or teachers who cared about the Shoah (or, if they did, were willing to admit it), had I (knowingly) met Jews prior to my mid-twenties, I might well have responded differently to the film, but I did not. What I brought to this film, then, as a "co-constituent" of its audience, was an uncritical enthusiasm I now recognize as being highly problematic. My earlier response may make me cringe with the benefit of hindsight but I see no point in being ashamed of it, given that I can explain how it came about. However, I certainly would not want to celebrate it either. Nor am I convinced, and this is perhaps the crucial point, of its progressive and emancipatory potential. Cultural productions that perpetuate the stereotypical assumptions of one group about another and/or misrepresent relations between them may help promote some measure of accommodation between those two groups but they can no more form the basis for genuine mutual acceptance than the conceit that everyone is fundamentally the same anyway.

The methodological fads currently at the forefront of the postmodern canon tend to essentialize and de-essentialize groups and the boundaries between them in a fairly arbitrary and voluntaristic manner. None too surprisingly, one's own favoured forms of identity politics tend to thrive on essentialization while the identity politics of those one dislikes are self-evidently in urgent need of de-essentialization. Hess's *Germans, Jews*

and the Claims of Modernity (2002), in which he built on Susannah Heschel's pioneering work in applying elements of postcolonial theory to Jewish/non-Jewish relations in German-speaking central Europe, indicates that his preoccupation with some of these new approaches was already well developed at a time when one could still be forgiven for assuming that their proponents' relationship to the tradition and potential of the Enlightenment was fundamentally characterized not by outright negation but by tough love. The various postmodern "isms" now assailing the Enlightenment project head-on strike me as being, in a sense, the Carl Schmitt of our generation: the Enlightenment stands no chance of truly and comprehensively coming into its own unless its proponents are able to provide answers to the sort of tough questions they raise, but as soon as one follows their own abhorrent answers to those questions, the entire Enlightenment project is doomed. This was, of course, the basic idea at the heart of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, though one would be hard-pressed to ascertain this from much of the Anglophone literature in which it is cited. Although I cannot be entirely sure, I would like to think that Hess remained committed not to the destruction of the Enlightenment project but to the deeply held desire to see it come into its own. It is a great shame that we can no longer discuss these issues with him.