

Middlebrow Literature and the Making of German-Jewish Identity. By Jonathan M. Hess. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. 280 pp. 5 ills. \$57.50 cloth.

In the course of the nineteenth century, the opportunities afforded by emancipation and modernization subjected the coherence and consistency of traditional constructions of Jewish identity to multiple challenges. It is within the larger context of this process of the modernization of European Jewry that Jonathan Hess's *Middlebrow Literature and the Making of German-Jewish Identity* charts Jewish responses to the challenges of modern society in the shifting historical and cultural setting of nineteenth-century Germany. In critical conversation with ground-breaking work by eminent scholars of German-Jewish literature—such as Hans Otto Horch, Itta Shedletzky, George L. Mosse, and Jonathan Sorkin—this meticulously researched, original, and engagingly written study persuasively presents a new perspective on the social and cultural function of Jewish literary production in nineteenth-century Germany.

Jewish participation in the rise of bourgeois culture demanded the negotiation of new cultural identities. The all-pervasive prominence of the concept of *Bildung* (education), corresponding to a rapidly expanding book market and the diffusion of reading culture via lending libraries, newspapers, journals, novels, plays, and serialized fiction, prompted the creation of a specifically Jewish literature in German. It found its voice

among other print media especially in periodicals, the most prominent of which was the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*. Launched in 1837 by the liberal rabbi and moderate reformer Ludwig Philippson in Magdeburg with a clearly defined agenda of creating “modern Jewish belles lettres” (Hess 27), it was later rivaled by projects such as the orthodox periodicals *Jeschurun*, established in 1854 and edited by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in Frankfurt am Main, and *Der Israelit*, founded by Rabbi Marcus Lehmann in Mainz in 1860.

These projects challenged the literary vision promoted by Philippson and his brother Phöbus, whose serialized novella, *Die Marannen* (1837), is discussed at length in the first chapter of Hess’s monograph as the archetypal example of the attempt to re-create through the experience of Sephardic Jews in Golden Age Spain a “usable past” for German Jews in historical fiction. *Die Marannen* aimed to provide a model of cultural, philosophical and aesthetic aspirations, while simultaneously foregoing any wistful retrospective sympathy for the *marranos*, by showing how the present in Germany surpassed the idealized lost paradise in Spain. Hess reads this novella, and similar texts, as articulations of cultural memory and, no less importantly, as conduits for new forms of Jewish historical consciousness which negotiated between popular and high culture in order to advance enlightenment and modernization.

The orthodox approach, as discussed by Hess in the fourth and last chapter of his study, proposed a very different model, one that was dedicated to the creative appropriation of mainstream secular literature in the endeavor of ensuring a harmonious balance between modern culture and a self-consciously orthodox Judaism. These texts, frequently written by rabbis, sought to create and sustain a vision of orthodoxy as tied to German culture and notions of modernity. By redirecting the allegiances of their readers in tales of contemporary life to orthodox virtues they maintained, in opposition to reformist tendencies, continuity with orthodox Jewish tradition.

Common to both approaches was the use of middlebrow literature by Jews to actively and self-consciously negotiate multiple identities and allegiances in nineteenth-century Germany while fulfilling in various ways, and with different forms of Judaism in mind, the cultural function of (re) affirming the commitment to Judaism. The same strategies are traced by Hess also in the second and third chapters of his monograph in other genres, the ghetto tale and romance fiction, respectively. The latter sought to direct the romantic fantasies prevalent in eighteenth and nineteenth-century fiction toward a clear commitment to Jewish continuity. It appropriated creatively popular-cultural narratives about romance to produce a tradition of middlebrow fiction in order to contribute to Jewish continuity by promoting fantasies of marrying into the faith and by valorizing filial piety and the reconciliation of the generations. Yet Hess is not blind to subversive

cross-currents as, for instance, in the work of Rahel Meyer whose novels, *Zwei Schwestern* (1853) and *In Baden frei* (1865), conveyed an intrinsic criticism of bourgeois complacency as well as Jewish optimism.

While the genres mentioned so far did not have much impact beyond the Jewish readership to which they were mainly addressed, the ghetto tale, associated in particular with Leopold Kompert, achieved critical acclaim beyond the confines of a putative Jewish subculture in Germany (a concept challenged by Hess) and even beyond the borders of this country. The ghetto tale, re-creating the immediate Ashkenazi past, was yet another attempt to find and negotiate a suitable aesthetic form for the Jewish past and transform the Jewish experience into high literature. Hess suggests that the ghetto tale—which, in the wake of Kompert's *Aus dem Ghetto* (1848), became the dominant form of German-Jewish writing during this period—pursued the objective of laying to rest the ghetto, of “making way for a world in which the ghetto lives on in literature—and in literature alone” (78). Again, Hess investigates the, albeit unintended, subversive potential of these texts, which were misconstrued by Christian critics as heralding the end of Judaism and the advent of Christianity, thus undermining the therapeutic function Hess argues to have been their objective.

Hess astutely observes and convincingly demonstrates that nineteenth-century Jewish literature ought to be understood not only in its individual national contexts but as the product of an extended transnational web of Jewish cultural production. Accordingly, Hess discusses a number of Anglo-Jewish and English pre-texts relevant to German-Jewish literature. Moreover, dissemination of the hundreds of historical novels, ghetto tales, and novels and novellas of contemporary life created in Germany between the late 1830s and 1890 reached far beyond the borders of the German-speaking countries in Europe. They were distributed in Central Europe as well as overseas through periodicals and publications of early book clubs, such as the Institut zur Förderung der israelitischen Literatur (1855–1873). The dissemination of prose fiction that was explicitly Jewish in content served the specific purpose of creating a Jewish public sphere. Significantly, these were efforts that had been paralleled since the early 1840s in the Anglophone world, as has been shown by Adam Mendelsohn. Obviously this larger context is beyond the remit of Hess's more narrowly defined area of interest, but it positions his own study and its findings at the cusp of “a comprehensive, transnational history of Jewish literature before 1900,” a highly desirable undertaking, which, as Hess observes, “remains a project for the future” (10). It will also be a cumulative project, reliant on the input of many scholars. Nevertheless, while hugely important in its own right as the study of a defining phenomenon in German-Jewish literary history, Hess's indispensable new study clearly suggests a starting point for the further exploration of the comparative dimension of Jewish

literary production in the nineteenth century.

While the scholarly acumen and importance of Hess's monograph deserve much praise, it is rather unfortunate that Stanford UP expects readers to sift forty pages of endnotes for bibliographical details. A bibliography would certainly have been an asset to future research. It is also worth pointing out that the superb resource of the Compact Memory database, an internet archive of German-Jewish periodicals initiated by Hans Otto Horch (<http://www.compactmemory.de>), will give the interested reader direct access to many of the more obscure texts discussed by Hess.

The chronological boundaries set by Hess, spanning half a century of German-Jewish literary production, beginning in 1837 and concluding in 1890, are dictated by his subject matter. The decades sandwiching the turn of the century were determined by drastic changes in response to political anti-Semitism, the rise of Zionism, and the surge of anti-bourgeois criticism, all of which relentlessly challenged the middlebrow project. Hess's monograph allows a tantalizing, if very brief, outlook on these further developments. Yet these are far beyond its remit. Indeed, the study's usefulness manifests itself not least in the clear delineation of the demise of the middlebrow project and in raising an awareness of its contrastive significance for an understanding of Jewish literary production in Germany prior to the Second World War. *Middlebrow Literature and the Making of German-Jewish Identity* will without doubt become a mile-stone not only in the study of German-Jewish literature and culture but of Jewish literature and culture in the nineteenth century in general.

Works Cited

Adam Mendelsohn. "Tongue Ties: The Emergence of the Anglophone Jewish Diaspora in the Mid-Nineteenth Century." *American Jewish History* 93.2 (2007): 177–209.