

Efraim Sicher

The Jew's Daughter:

A Cultural History of a Conversion Narrative

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reviewed by Ryan Szpiech

In Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, after the fair Jewish daughter Jessica ("Most beautiful pagan! Most sweet Jew!") converts to Christianity and elopes with the handsome Lorenzo, we hear how her father, Shylock, the "dog Jew," wails in despair at being robbed of both his money and his masculinity: "My daughter! O my ducats! . . . two rich and precious stones, / Stolen by my daughter!" This iconic image of the beautiful Jewess and her ugly, emasculated father is one of scores of such depictions that together constitute the subject of Efraim Sicher's rich and ambitious study, which spans a millennium of cultural production, including literature, theater, art and film. This is neither a general history of anti-Semitism nor an analysis of one isolated anti-Jewish stereotype. Rather, *The Jew's Daughter* traces the perennial image of "the Jew and his daughter as a gendered pair in a binary relation" (p. 10), considering it in both its negative and its positive manifestations. The text aims to establish "how the narrative of the Jew and his daughter informs discourses about gender, sexuality, race, and nationhood in European societies from the eleventh to the twenty-first centuries" (p. 2).

To present a full description of the book's contents would be challenging, because it takes in so many examples across so many periods. Nevertheless, its roughly chronological structure allows for a comprehensive birds-eye view. The Introduction justifies both the particular focus on the father-daughter pair and the extensive period over which this pair is chronicled. Although Sicher refrains from discussing religious polemics in great detail, he is right to start with the "dual image" of Judaism in Christian thought, both reviled and fetishized. Reminding us of the ambivalent image of *Synagoga*, so ubiquitous in medieval iconography, as young and fair but also blindfolded and defeated, Sicher reads this image as a theological expression of the Roman theme of the captured daughter of Zion, *Judea Capta*, commemorated on Roman coins issued under Titus.

Chapter One, "Genesis," then treats the medieval origins of the image of the Jew's daughter, focusing on the medieval ballad "Sir Hugh, or the Jew's Daughter," associated

with the blood libel of Hugh of Lincoln (1255) (p. 25). The predatory evil of the Jew's daughter in helping to murder the innocent little Christian boy, Hugh, becomes in subsequent legends also a betrayal of the father himself after she is seduced by a Christian suitor. Sicher alludes briefly to the persistent gendering of anti-Jewish polemical discourse in medieval Europe, in which ugly Jewish males—deformed, effeminate, diseased and obstinately resisting conversion—were the counterpoint to beautiful young Jewish daughters whose willingness to convert symbolized the salvation of Israel itself in its new Christian form.

Chapter Two, "The Book of Esther," looks at another medieval legend, that of Rachel, "the Jewess of Toledo," in which the Jew's daughter becomes the mistress of the Christian king. As a reworking of the book of Esther, this legend emphasizes the Jew's daughter as a dangerous point of contact between cultures. In this scenario, "the Jew-father is usually lurking somewhere behind the Beautiful Jewess, representing the power of some Jewish conspiracy or lobby undermining the state" (p. 15).

Chapter Three, "Daughteronomy," looks at England in the sixteenth century, in which the most iconic representations of the Jew's daughter appear in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* (1592) and Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (1594–1596). Sicher here presents "the daughter of the Jew as a vehicle for amplifying uncertainties about nation and religious identities and the uncertainties of conversion in general" (p. 91). Among those anxieties are the economic concerns that emerged as England began to expand rapidly as a maritime power and trading empire (p. 106).

Chapter Four, "Exodus," turns to the image of the beautiful Jew's daughter in German texts from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, taking up both the real-life stories of the conversion of upper-class Jewesses of the period (such as Henriette Herz) and broad-minded characterizations of tolerance such as that of Nathan and his daughter Recha in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Nathan der Weise* (1779). Sicher uses these examples to examine how the topos of the conversion of the Jew's daughter served as a primary means of discussing whether the social emancipation of the Jews was beneficial to German society.

Chapter Five, "Second Daughteronomy," looks at Romantic images of the Jew's daughter in nineteenth-century English and American fiction and drama. Sicher gives special attention to the images of Montenero and Berenice in Maria Edgeworth's *Harrington* (1817), Isaac of York and Rebecca in Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819) and Mirah Lapidoth in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), while also including a long list of obscure but related titles, such as Amelia Bristow's *Sophia De Lissau* (1824), M.G. Lewis's *The Jewish Maiden* (1830) and Henry Ruffner's *Judith Bensaddi* (1839), among numerous others. The focus of this reading is less on conversion per se than on what these representations say about Englishness and social identity in relation to social tolerance.

Chapter Six, "A Song of Songs," turns to the French figure of the *Belle Juive* and argues that "orientalization of the colonial body . . . grants the Jewess an ambiguous place in the racial hierarchy, which is determined by the power relations between the colonial authorities and [their] North African subjects" (p. 16). Sicher's analysis

of texts such as George Sand's *Lavinia* (1833), and Balzac's *Illusions perdues* (1837–1843) and *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (1838–1847), among others, underscores how, in the absence of the protective control of the ugly Jewish father, the beautiful Jewess is easily transmogrified into a dangerous *femme fatale*, a decadent Salomé or Judith who overpowers Gentile (male) desire and infects it with disease and corruption.

Sicher does not limit himself to novels but also includes plays, operas and even paintings in his capacious purview. In an especially revealing passage, he juxtaposes visual materials such as the Orientalist paintings of Delacroix (*Mariée Juive à Tanger*, 1832) and Dehodencq (*L'exécution de la Juive*, 1852), fixing a colonial gaze upon the beautiful Jewess, with contemporary works by Jewish painters, such as the beguiling rendition of *Shylock and Jessica* (1876) by Polish Romantic painter Maurycy Gottlieb, and with fictional portrayals of Jewish painters such as the character of Miriam in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1859). The epilogue presents a number of suggestive images from twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature and film, in which the objectified *Belle Juive* has grown into an "avenging *Juive Fatale*," a strong and angry Jewish woman striking back at the lustful colonialist and gentile gaze. Yet, comparing the erotic Israeli soldier at the end of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) to Gal Gadot in *Wonder Woman* (2017), Sicher concludes: "the strong Sabra woman, then, does not signal the end of the *Belle Juive* ... but introduces a counter-image to the emasculated, effeminate male Jew and to the stereotypes of the Jewish American Princess, 'Nice Jewish Girl,' or Jewish Mother" (p. 262).

Sicher is an attentive and creative reader, and he repeatedly points out telling details and narrative structures that enrich our understanding of his sources. This book is impressive, moreover, not only on account of Sicher's astute critical sensibility, but also due to the sheer number of examples that he manages to weave together into a coherent unity. However, this abundance proves to be something of a burden as well as a blessing. Certainly Sicher cannot be faulted for the vastness of his subject matter, nor for his valiant attempts to harness together so many diverse examples in a comprehensible narrative. Yet, despite the chronological presentation and clear analysis, the reader can easily become numbed to the ongoing parade of cases and variants, sometimes losing track of the subtle differences between them. Sicher's attempts to cover so many periods and literary traditions also inevitably leads to occasional confusion over certain historical details. For example, King Sancho IV of Castile is said to be the father of King Alfonso X rather than his son (p. 64), and Gonzalo de Berceo is dated to the fifteenth century rather than the thirteenth (p. 70). While such peccadilloes are of little consequence, more taxing are the sometimes forced transitions linking historical periods. For example, Chapter One offers the lamentable beginning: "Before we get to modern times, it is worth pausing in the Middle Ages ..." (p. 25).

On a conceptual level, Sicher raises many very useful questions about gender and religious difference (e.g., "Why, indeed, should women be thought more susceptible to conversion than men?" p. 17). Many of his answers (such as in his discussion of

marriage and emancipation in Germany and England) are original and fruitful. The book as a whole could have been even stronger if Sicher had dedicated more space to theoretical questions, not only describing the many faces of the Jew's Daughter, but also explaining the meaning of their perdurable popularity in analytical terms. For example, he claims that the Jew's Daughter "engages with a gendered Other at multiple levels of social behavior and ideological positioning," (p. 2, and cf. p. 18)—true enough on the surface—but he does not go on to theorize about the meaning of that "gendered Other" in enough depth. This reviewer would have appreciated more elaboration on the claim made in the introduction, which can be taken as the overall argument of the book, that the Jew's Daughter "is a paradigm of conversion narratives based on [a] theological premise, but the pattern holds long after the religious faith that motivated it has evaporated" (p. 2). The upshot of this is significant: European concerns about cultural change—a new mercantilism in Elizabethan England, a new bourgeois tolerance in Enlightenment Germany, a new concern over the limits of Englishness in Victorian England, or a new colonialist worry over disease and racial superiority in *fin-de-siècle* France—can all be understood as recapitulations of an essentially theological image sketched in medieval polemical writing. The medieval conversion narrative, as an embodiment of the basic Christian anxiety over Christianity's legitimacy as the New Israel that claims to replace the Jews in sacred history, proves to be a sort of skeleton key for understanding change across a wide swath of Western cultural expression. This assumption lies quietly at the heart of the book and deserves to be highlighted more emphatically.

On a textual level, another question that might be explored in more detail is how the dyad of the Jew and his daughter intersects with other father–daughter pairs in literature (Silas and Eppie Marner come to mind). How might our view of Shylock and Jessica change if we were to compare them not only to Marlowe's Abigail and Barabas but also to Shakespeare's other fathers and daughters (Lear and Cordelia, for example)? Similarly, if a Jewish daughter's conversion is, for some fathers, akin to her death (p. 240), how might we compare it with the deaths of other Jewish women in literature (such as Herod's execution, under Salomé's influence, of his wife Mariam, in Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry*, 1613)? Or might we compare the attempted suicides of Jewesses (such as Mirah Lapidoth's attempted suicide in the opening of *Daniel Deronda*) with the lovesick suicides of other rebellious literary daughters (for example, Melibea's suicide in front of her father Pleberio in Fernando de Rojas's *Celestina* [1499], or Ophelia's suicide after her beloved Hamlet kills her father Polonius, or indeed, literature's most famous suicide, that of Juliet Capulet)? While Sicher's dense study may already be too full to make room for such comparisons, it will surely provide ample material for further reflection on these related subjects.

On the whole, *The Jew's Daughter* is an important book that succeeds remarkably well at bringing a complex but critically essential literary motif into clear focus, and Sicher's subtle and provocative close readings and hints at broader questions will undoubtedly serve as a valuable foundation for future studies.

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