



5-2012

## Review of *The Other Jewish Question: Identifying the Jew and Making Sense of Modernity*

Kerry Wallach  
*Gettysburg College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/gerfac>



Part of the [German Language and Literature Commons](#)

[Share feedback](#) about the accessibility of this item.

---

### Recommended Citation

Wallach, Kerry. "Jay Geller. *The Other Jewish Question: Identifying the Jew and Making Sense of Modernity*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011." In *German Studies Review* 35, no. 2 (2012): 393–395.

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/gerfac/39>

This open access review is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

## Review of The Other Jewish Question: Identifying the Jew and Making Sense of Modernity

### Abstract

The “Jewish question” (*Judenfrage*) has referred to pressing concerns about the political status and fate of European Jewry since roughly the 1770s. In German and Austrian lands, Jewish emancipation, acculturation, and secularization gave rise to a slippery understanding of Jewishness (*Judentum*) among both Jews and non-Jews. Who should be considered a Jew was determined according to increasingly antisemitic and so-called racial (rather than religious) specifications; many came to regard Jewishness as indelible. [*excerpt*]

### Keywords

review, other jewish question

### Disciplines

German Language and Literature

*The Other Jewish Question: Identifying the Jew and Making Sense of Modernity.* By Jay Geller. New York: Fordham UP. 2011. Pp. 510. Paper \$35.00. ISBN 978-0-8232-3362-5.

The “Jewish Question” (*Judenfrage*) has referred to pressing concerns about the political status and fate of European Jewry since roughly the 1770s. In German and Austrian lands, Jewish emancipation, acculturation, and secularization gave rise to a slippery understanding of Jewishness (*Judentum*) among both Jews and non-Jews. Who should be considered a Jew was determined according to increasingly antisemitic and so-called “racial” (rather than religious) specifications; many came to regard Jewishness as indelible.

The “Other” Jewish Question of Jay Geller’s significant contribution to Cultural Studies addresses the roles physiognomic and bodily constructs have played in processes of Jewish identification and self-identification. Geller explores how a number of prominent “text-producing self- and other-identified Jews” (4) from Baruch Spinoza to Heinrich Heine, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Walter Benjamin “mediated” Jewish identification; that is to say, how they approached the ascription (or denial) of Jewish identity. Masterfully, Geller grapples with issues of racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual difference – but also with physiology, pathology, nationalism, and antisemitism – as they pertain to Jewishness. Though this book nominally spans Germanophone texts produced from 1771 to 1940 (the birth of Rahel Levin Varnhagen to the death of Walter Benjamin), it also deals intensively with seventeenth-century Spinozan claims and their reception, thereby locating 1632 (Spinoza’s birth) at the dawn of German-Jewish modernity.

Geller’s central methodological move is the shift from the study of Jewish “identity” to the study of “identification.” Drawing on the work of sociologist Rogers Brubaker (*Ethnicity*

*Without Groups*, 2004), which is increasingly present in Jewish Cultural Studies today, Geller updates our understanding of processes for identifying the Jewish body. In departing from fixed notions of “identity,” Geller opens up a broader range of texts, including many which are not easily read with respect to Jewishness. Indeed, some can be downright problematic: after all, it is difficult for scholars of (German-)Jewish Studies to draw on works such as Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* or Artur Dinter’s *Die Sünde wider das Blut* without digressing into a study of antisemitism. Yet in its supremely careful and erudite readings of texts produced by Jewish writers, as well as texts and discourses that emerged from concurrent antisemitic climates, *The Other Jewish Question* provides fascinating interpretations of cultural motifs and their effects on identification within cultural and historical contexts.

An impressive number of texts receive close attention in Geller’s quest to trace a genealogy of ascriptions (and inscriptions) of Jewishness. Whereas his analysis concentrates on representations of the circumcised Jewish body, Geller goes beyond *Beschneidung* to include “other such corporeally coded ‘quasi-objects’ that supplemented, that helped make visible, the circumcised: noses, smells, voice, hair, mimicry, animality, rags, diet, disease and diseased reproduction” (19). In an introduction and nine chapters that proceed more or less chronologically (plus over 100 pages rich with interesting notes), he analyzes: 1) the persistence of circumcision (Spinoza, Moses Hess, Berthold Auerbach); 2) interrelationships of Chinese and Jewish hair (Heine; German Romantics such as E.T.A. Hoffmann, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Achim von Arnim); 3) figurations of diseases including syphilis and leprosy (primarily in texts by antisemitic writers, including *Mein Kampf*); 4) gender difference (Varnhagen); 5) food, particularly onions and garlic (Ludwig Feuerbach); 6) Marx’s usages of the morphemes *Lump-* and *Verkehr-*, including topics such as the rag trade and prostitution; 7) Max Nordau’s

conspicuous pre-Zionist omissions; 8) paranoiac Daniel Paul Schreber's vision of a non-Jewish Wandering Jew (Schreber, Freud); and 9) Walter Benjamin's understanding of the "Jewish aroma" (Benjamin, Franz Kafka, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno). Despite his emphasis in these chapters on well-known works and authors, Geller never ceases to cull additional arcane cultural tidbits that few before him have unpacked.

This book also advances the field of Jewish Gender Studies in several ways. Building on the work of scholars such as Sander Gilman, Daniel Boyarin, and Jonathan Boyarin, Geller explores the notion that Jewish difference finds unique and permanent expression on the body of the "feminized" male Jew. Given that *The Other Jewish Question* functions as a kind of sequel to Geller's *On Freud's Jewish Body: Mitigating Circumcisions* (2007), an in-depth study of Freud's responses to the trauma of antisemitism, it is not surprising that this second volume focuses disproportionately on circumcision as a fetishized signifier. From Heine's works in which the braid (*Zopf*) figures as a similar mark of Jewishness, to Nordau's exclusion of circumcision from his list of Jewish customs, no possible reference to (or intimation of) male genitalia goes unattended here. In a commendable – though by no means commensurate – effort to consider the female body, Geller devotes a portion of his analysis to women's reproductive roles, and all of chapter four (an updated version of his essay in Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt's *Judaism since Gender*, 1997) to the provocative argument that a Jewess, too, could embody circumcised male/Jewish difference. Bodies are gendered either male or female in this book, with the occasional transgressor such as Varnhagen; curiously, there is no mention of other/ungendered bodies (as in the memoirs of N.O. Body/Karl Baer, 1907) or of the "*Volkskörper*" as discussed by scholars such as Sharon Gillerman.

Whereas the book follows a number of circuitous (though not gratuitous) routes, it certainly accomplishes its stated goal of constructing a “physiognomic epidemiology of the fetishized Jew” (the title of the introduction) by mapping interrelationships between objects, “quasi-objects,” and bodies. As a physiognomist, Geller surveys (body) surfaces and what lies below; as an epidemiologist of sorts, he sniffs out, probes, and diagnoses potential causes of unhealthy attitudes toward Jewishness. But he rightfully stops short of providing a concluding resolution to the Other Jewish Question; instead, he poses many new ones.

Much anticipated, this book formulates cutting-edge directions for the study of both canonical figures and the broader cultural milieu in which German-speakers self-identified, and were identified, as Jews. It provides a near-comprehensive and thorough examination of diverse texts from the Enlightenment through the 1930s. Germanists, cultural historians, and scholars of German-Jewish Studies, antisemitism, race, ethnicity, and identity will engage (and wrestle) with Geller’s sometimes playful, and always ambitious arguments for years to come.

KERRY WALLACH, *Gettysburg College*