

Boyarin, Adrienne Williams. The Christian Jew and the Unmarked Jewess: The Polemics of Sameness in Medieval English Anti-Judaism. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021

Jim Bunton

Volume 19, Number 1, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1101379ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/wij.v19i1.41326>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Women in Judaism, Inc.

ISSN

1209-9392 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Bunton, J. (2022). Review of [Boyarin, Adrienne Williams. The Christian Jew and the Unmarked Jewess: The Polemics of Sameness in Medieval English Anti-Judaism. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021]. *Women in Judaism*, 19(1), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.33137/wij.v19i1.41326>

Boyarin, Adrienne Williams. *The Christian Jew and the Unmarked Jewess: The Polemics of Sameness in Medieval English Anti-Judaism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021.

Reviewed by Jim Bunton, Des Moines Area Community College, Ankeny, IA, USA

Most research on medieval Christian Jewish relations has viewed the topic through the lens of difference; consider, for example, the works of M. Lindsay Kaplanⁱ and Lisa R. Lampart-Weissig.ⁱⁱ Instead, Adrienne Williams Boyarin in *The Christian Jew and the Unmarked Jewess: The Polemics of Sameness in Medieval English Anti-Judaism* is concerned with the realities and fantasies of sameness. Boyarin identifies the Christian wish for sameness and yet the simultaneous need for distinction such that the aspiration for sameness is not indication of Christian benevolence but rather an effort to eradicate through becoming the Jew. This polemic of sameness, as Boyarin coined the term, concerns the fear of the indistinguishability of Christians and Jews reflected in the Christian desire to erase, assimilate or embody Jewishness. But at the same time, the Christian anxiety concerning the ability of Jews, particularly the Jewess, to invade Christian space without detection. The tension of sameness is rooted and exacerbated in the Christian connection to Judaism through Jesus' Jewishness and Christianity's origin in Judaism. In this context, otherness and sameness are always contending with one another (3).

In contrast to the typical approach to studies of anti-Judaism in medieval England that focus their research on expulsion and absence, for example, Anthony Bale and Jeremy Cohen, this book focuses on Jewish presence through text and images that engage or represent medieval Anglo-Jews. Throughout this book, there is a constant conflict between Jewish presence, either through a presence in the text that engages with real world Jewish presence or in textual moments within the literature that point to Jewish presence (2). Even after the expulsion, Jews still retain their presence through texts and images.

The focus on sameness as an interpretative framework marks a different approach than that taken in previous analyses in other scholarship. Lindsay Kaplan's work concerns racial distinctions and asserts that these distinctions created an inherent and permanent sense of servitude and inferiority. Lisa Lampart-Weissig has a slightly different focus than that of Kaplan. For her, gender distinguishes between man and woman, and can also be used to distinguish between Christian and

Jew. But Christian and Jewish polemic, interaction, and representation is not only about difference, this demonstrates the necessity for Boyarin's approach. The very need to create distinction indicates that the problem of sameness existed and, as Boyarin will argue, still exist, despite an active effort to make distinctions. This approach differs from most studies that establish how differences are maintained; the focus here is on how sameness persists.

The book analyses medieval English legal, literary, and historical documents through the lens of sameness. The book is divided into two parts. The first part outlines the case for a polemics of sameness in general by demonstrating how easily Jews could pass as Christians. The book's second part illustrates how gendered this polemics is by examining the Jewess in medieval English texts and images. The author's approach is to initiate each part with stories or letters and to continuously explore sameness through the additional introduction of texts and images situated through storytelling, thematic organization, and the movement of individual text through multiple chapters. The careful unfolding of the argument is engaging and compelling. This approach enables the sources to speak for themselves, slowly building a crescendo of sameness.

The first part opens with the story of Samson, who was accused of disguising himself as a Christian friar. The ease with which he was able to accomplish this charade suggest the potential blurring of the distinction between Jews and Christians. Illustrating the need for Christian authority was represented by the Archbishop of Canterbury to re-establish these boundaries of separation. Boyarin provides a provocative interpretation of the sentence handed out to Samson. Samson receives the punishment of walking nude through five cities, thus exposing the mark of circumcision while holding the intestines of a calf in his hand and frayed calf around his neck. For Boyarin, this punishment symbolizes the need to repent as the prodigal son did in the story from the Christian Scriptures (Luke 15), and what the Israelites did in response to the sin of the golden calf written in the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 32). The other story, related by Boyarin, was about a five-year-old boy who was found apparently just circumcised and claiming to be a Jew but later changed his story; stating that he was a Christian and that he had been forced to be circumcised. Both the Jewish and Christian communities claimed him. These stories will be recontextualized throughout the book, particularly the first part, through an examination of sameness in the medieval commentary *Orrmulum* and narratives of the *Chronicle of Jocelm of Brakeland*, and the Judas

Ballad. The *Chronicle of Jocelm of Brakeland*, in particular, gives an excellent example of techniques that allow Christians to assume the identity of Jewish Biblical characters.

In the second part, the author delves into the notion of the Unmark Jewess. The Jewish woman was enmeshed in the life of England's "majority" and, as such, had captured a greater part of medieval England's imagination (93). The Jewish woman's similarities to the Christian woman are a regular part of her caricature, as illustrated by examining letters, literary works, historiographical material, and devotionals. Like Lampart-Weissig, Boyarin argues that the perceived palatability of the Jewess marks her as a target for conversion. For Boyarin, this potential fluid movement between Judaism and Christianity is reflected in the opening letters of a Jewish woman convert to Christianity. These letters highlight an ease and comfortability with combining various Christian and Jewish images, such as Christian Testament images of Mary and allusion to Jewish heritage that are interwoven.

In the final section of the book, Boyarin examines the question of where the place of the Jew is when the Christian replaces the Jew. Boyarin argues that the contemporary movement to co-opt Judaism is Messianic Judaism demonstrated by Vice President Pence asking a Christian leader identified as a rabbi to pray for the eleven people murdered at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, and ending his prayer in the name of Jesus. The implication of this example is that when the Christian and the Jew become one; the Jew who is not a Christian does not exist. That is, in such circumstances, the Christian does not simply desire to supersede the Jew but actually to become the Jew (8) displacing the Jew and making the Jew's existence an impossibility.

The book is interdisciplinary leveraging gender studies, Jewish studies, English studies, the study of Christian and Jewish relations, Medieval studies, and other disciplines. Boyarin's careful selection of diverse genres of sources including visual images makes a strong scholarly argument for the "polemic of sameness." It adds a fresh and vital perspective that goes beyond the more traditional academic emphasis on differences and expulsion. The use of novel interpretations of various medieval English literary works is exceptional. Finally, the connection with contemporary movements within Christianity that seek to co-opt Jews and Jewish symbols, blurring the distinction between Jews and Christian, introduces a contemporary implication to a medieval examination. However, the skipping of over seven hundred years of history to get to this

contemporary observation seems a bit abrupt, not allowing for significant changes over those centuries and highlighting the ways in which our own contemporary considerations and questions impact the way that we understand and interpret the past. Overall, this work is a unique contribution to several disciplines.

ⁱ See, *Figuring Racism in Medieval Christianity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.
The Culture of Slander in Early Modern England. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

ⁱⁱ See, *Medieval Literature and Postcolonial Studies*. Edinburgh University Press, 2010.
Gender and Jewish Difference from Paul to Shakespeare. University of Pennsylvania Press, Middle Ages Series, 2004.