

Maria Diemling and Giuseppe Veltri, eds. *The Jewish Body: Corporeality, Society, and Identity in the Renaissance and Early Modern Period*.

Studies in Jewish History and Culture 17. Leiden: Brill, 2009. ix + 488 pp. index. append. illus. tpls. €135. ISBN: 978-9004-16718-6.

This book is an exciting new contribution to Jewish studies and early modern European history. Maria Diemling and Giuseppe Veltri have assembled an accomplished group of scholars and collected an important store of articles concerning physicality in early modern Jewish culture. Its contents are broad enough to appeal to a wide readership of scholars and students in gender studies, cultural history, intellectual history, anthropology, religious studies, Kabbalah — even the history of music and art. In spite of this considerable topical and thematic diversity the book avoids losing focus; in one way or another each contribution responds to Diemling and Veltri's organizing question: how did early modern Jews react to the period's increased emphasis on and interest in corporeality?

The book is divided into four parts. Part 1, "The Body in Historical and Social Context," contains contributions that analyze Jewish writings about the body and medicine, mysticism, and *halakha* (Jewish law). The second part, "The Halakhic Body," considers how jurists addressed issues such as sexuality, bodily purity, and

virginity. Part 3, “Body, Mind and Soul,” includes articles that focus on Jewish mysticism and philosophy. These contributions attend to the relationship between the body, mind, and soul in early modern Jewish thought. The fourth and final section, “The Body in Jewish-Christian Discourse,” concentrates on cross-fertilization in Jewish and Christian writings, especially in Italy.

One of this volume’s merits lies in its explicit and convincing argument that sixteenth- and seventeenth- century writers displayed a pronounced interest in the body. A fine introductory essay by Roni Weinstein shows how trends emerged at this time in Catholic theology, experimental science, and European art that placed a new emphasis on, respectively, suffering, anatomy, and nudity. He then demonstrates how various genres of Jewish scholarship, including Kabbalah, homiletics, and jurisprudence reacted to shifting dynamics in European culture. In line with the book’s mission, the most successful contributions analyze Jewish adaptations of Christian trends or Christian adaptations of Jewish ones.

Eleazar Gutwirth’s essay in this volume, for example, shows how the notion of exile had a conspicuous presence in Renaissance medical writings. His article illustrates how attention to the body often led to psychological insight, and he establishes how Jewish medical texts reflected trends in Christian ones. Giuseppe Veltri scrutinizes an extended correspondence between an early modern Jewess and a Christian scholar and argues that in their discussions about beauty each interwove Jewish and Christian motifs. Saverio Campanini’s chapter addresses the reverse process: how Jewish mystical ideas were assimilated and transformed by the Christian Kabbalists Paulus Ricius and Francesco Giorgio. And the body plays a key role in this subject: Campanini explains how for Ricius and other sixteenth-century Christian mystics the composition of the human body was understood to be a microcosmic reproduction of the structure of the divine world. Along these lines, Gianfranco Miletto provides an illuminating reading of a difficult sermon by the Mantuan virtuoso Judah Moscato, in which the human body, corresponding to heavenly perfection, is arranged according to musical ratios.

One shortcoming of this book is its disproportionate attention to bodily dysfunction. These pages are strewn with tales of debilitating illness and aberrant sexual behavior. Two notable exceptions to this trend are Jeffrey R. Woolf’s article on sixteenth-century Judaism’s most important legal text, the *Shulhan Arukh* of Joseph Caro, and Maria Diemling’s insightful analysis of seventeenth-century Yiddish autobiographical texts. Future contributions to this growing field might shed light on non-sensational quotidian life: food and drink, exercise, hygiene, and childbirth, to name only a few. To their credit, the editors themselves acknowledge some of these deficiencies (11–12). The fact that these desiderata exist indicates how much additional work remains to be done — the book’s ultimate success will depend on how much quality scholarship follows in its wake. In any case, *The Jewish Body’s* omissions should not overshadow its achievement: introducing a wide readership to a central preoccupation of Jewish intellectuals in the early modern period: the body.

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