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Susan L. Einbinder, *Beautiful Death: Jewish Poetry and Martyrdom in Medieval France*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002. xii + 219 pp. Bibliography and index. \$35.00 U.S.; £24.95 G.B. (cl). ISBN 0-691-09053-X.

Review by Miri Rubin, Queen Mary College, University of London.

Beautiful Death is a beautiful book with affinities to several areas of scholarly endeavour and inquiry. Its subject matter is the Jewish poetry written in the aftermath of massacres, plangent and commemorative chants which sometimes found their way into regular liturgical practice. The author concentrates on the poetry made by the Jews of France and takes very seriously the task of creating a rich and meaningful cultural and political French context. The guiding interest is in the poetic treatment of glorified death, the death of the martyr "*al kiddush ha-shem*." It thus echoes the interest of several recent books (by Goldin, Boyarin, Winstead, Gregory) in martyrdom and martyrology, themes that are bound increasingly to interact with political and cultural questions of contemporary global politics. This is a book about the power of poetry to commemorate, to motivate, to contain, and perhaps even to alleviate pain. It is also one about the hybrid nature of Jewish culture in the many homes which Jews have inhabited throughout the centuries.

Following an introduction, the book contains six inter-linked essays, four of which (chapters one, two, three, and five) offer close readings of texts in the context of their production. Chapter one offers a survey of Jewish martyrological poetry from the first crusade onwards and an argument about change within the genre. This poetry develops a powerful image of the martyr, a person who has chosen death over a life deemed un-liveable as a convert. The poetry which remembered the crusade massacres emphasised the numbers and the unanimity of the martyrs. It dwelt not on individual psychology but on collective determination. And it always reassured its audience that acts of martyrdom were pleasing to God, even as they were traumatic and devastating to survivors. By the late twelfth century a much more confrontational, aggressive, and vitriolic tone characterises the laments. Their aim shifts subtly from the celebration of Jewish steadfastness to the reviling of the Christian enemy and of the Christian faith and its material attributes, as in Judah Bar Qalonymos's lament for the martyrs of Speyer in 1196 with its phrases, "god and molten divinities," "a bastard shall not enter the Lord's congregation," and "hanged man is accursed." Einbinder suggests that the polemical thrust is one aimed at deterring Jews from conversion in the decades which may have seen growing numbers of converts in England and France. She is to be congratulated for attempting to engage in an area fraught with methodological and ideological pitfalls, but her conclusion must remain tentative for the time being.

Chapter two centres on the emergence of the martyrological motif of the martyr who does not burn, an image known in the idiom and imagery of several religions. Einbinder identifies it in some of the laments for the martyrs of Blois in 1171, following the accusation by a Christian servant that the Jews had tossed a murdered child in the Loire, in the first French instance of an accusation of ritual murder

developed some twenty years earlier in England. The Count of Blois turned against his Jews, and thirty-two men and women were executed. Four of the eight laments tell of some of the martyrs who did not burn, and these were, according to Ephraim of Bonn, the students of revered rabbis, members of an intellectual and devotional elite. Hillel of Bonn describes a pair, bound together in the fire, "Yehiel and Yekutiel." Here was a divine ordeal, in which the purest were not burnt and by their survival forced Christians to acknowledge their innocence. Polemical it was, but also exemplary, for the Jews of other neighbouring French communities--Troyes, Orléans--instituted days of fast and remembrance for the martyrs, from whom they were meant to learn and teach their young.

Chapter three explores the many resonances of the language of martyrdom by studying the lament for the burnt books of the Talmud: can a book be a martyr? The text in question is the poem "*Sh'ali serufah ba-esh*" ("Ask, you who are burnt in fire"), written by the scholar Meir of Rothenburg who had witnessed as a young student in Paris the burning of the Talmud there in 1242. The poem's strong inter-textual links with one of the greatest poems of yearning for Zion, by the eleventh-century poet Yehudah Ha-Levi, is assessed, for the feminine subject of Zion in the older poem is replaced by the Talmud as female subject. Einbinder suggests that the construction of the poem's subject as female acts dialectically as a polemical response to the lyrical language in which the Virgin Mary was addressed in the thirteenth century. She also explores the intellectual contacts which linked scholars such as Meir with Jewish writers from Provence and Iberia. The book's claim to be about France is clearly inadequate fully to contain the remit of its discussion and the need to consider the movements of ideas and texts among Jewish European scholars. Here the concept of medieval France does little service.

Chapter four is a short set of reflections around a newly transcribed and edited poem from London (British Library, Additional MS 11639). It is an elegy, a poem written about the martyr Sansom who, in 1276, was tortured and burnt alive in Metz. Stepping aside from her method of thick historical contextualization, here Einbinder uses this text and the markings which have accumulated around it to direct our attention to the many questions that its reading raises. The poem's language suggests that Sansom was not a conventional martyr, but rather that he may have been a Jewish convert who returned to Judaism and was punished as a blasphemous Christian. His friend, the poet, remembered him as a martyr none the less, a man caught up between fear and loyalty, between the threat of Christians and the opprobrium of Jews. Einbinder suggests that the poem captures a painful and current reality which more polished and "official" liturgical laments efface: that the pressure to convert was strong and that Jews succumbed to it. Indeed, several early fourteenth-century French cases are known of the burning of Jews who had converted and then recanted their new religion--sometimes blaspheming their new faith in a way that can only have been a kind of death wish--and paid for those gestures with their lives. Here one such man is remembered by a friend and offered, for our consideration, as a martyr.

Chapter five deals with the laments written after the execution in Troyes in 1288 of thirteen Jews (of whom two were women and one a boy). During dinner, in a week that saw Passover and Easter coincide, Isaac Chatelain was framed by an accusation of child murder. The five surviving laments mention Franciscan and Dominican involvement in attempts to convert the accused Jews. Among the laments Einbinder concentrates on are those in Hebrew and Old French written by Jacob of Lorraine, translations of each other. The French poem describes in detail the martyrdom of Isaac's family, with a powerful imaging of the killing of his pregnant wife. The Chatelain boys were killed together, and the fear of the youngest is movingly depicted: "*Lo petit . / dit: haro! j'ar tos! E li grant li aprent / E li dit: a paradis seras tot, je to acrant.*" Through a comparative discussion, Einbinder points to the detail of the events enshrined in the vernacular French, while the Hebrew, product of a well-established tradition of martyrological poetry with biblical borrowings, displays less suppleness and narrative drive. Here are a brace of poems about a meal interrupted, a festivity terminated, the lives of ordinary Jewish folk put to a cruel and painful end.

Chapter six, the last, treats not a martyrological text, but a possible moment in which Jewish magical beliefs rise to the historical surface. In a Latin source describing the host desecration accusation of 1290, the accused is said to have asked for a little book (*libellum*) which he wished to hold as protection against the fire. Einbinder sees this as the vestige of a genuine request by the Jew, Jonathan, and traces it through some fifteenth-century texts: the polemical *Fortalitium fidei* by Alfonso da Spina and the French play, *Le jeu de la sainte hostie*. Pursuing the motif of "incombustibility," she suggests that Jonathan wished to have his amuletic *tefillin* with him in the fire. This is a postscript to the book's main chapters, which deserves further exploration in a comparative mode, bearing in mind works such as Bob Scribner's study of the incombustible images of Martin Luther.

Beautiful Death is a rich and suggestive book, the product of a lively intelligence and broad scholarship that combines immersion in Jewish sources with awareness of the many relevant contexts of encounter, exchange, and emulation within which Jewish cultural production operated. As much as martyrologies celebrate the glory of martyrs, they also leave traces of the struggle to establish discipline and the acceptance of death, especially when an alternative (conversion, collaboration) was on offer. This book will interest all those who study medieval religions, with the martyrological language of exhortation, taught and recited and read in what were, for most people, far less dramatic and testing life-worlds. It questions the nature of moral leadership, of the dialectic of attraction and loathing which characterised the more polarised areas of Jewish and Christian contact, and probes the pedagogy and community building, as well as the abjection, that martyrological values can promote. Above all, it reminds us of the power of words, and of love, and arising from both, of poetry.

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