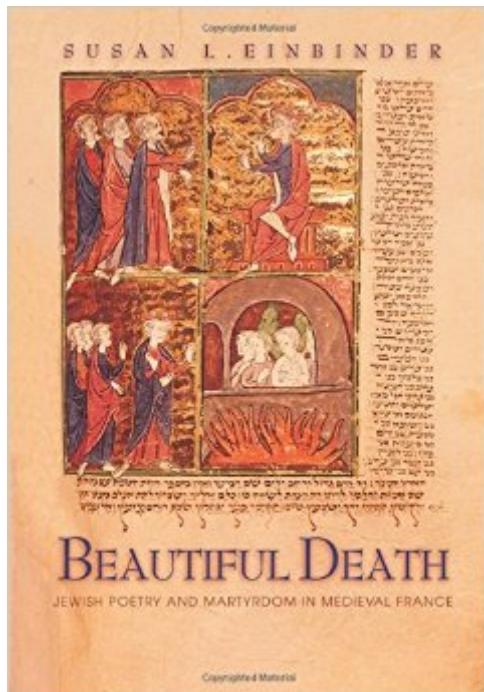


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Beautiful Death: Jewish Poetry And Martyrdom In Medieval France (Jews, Christians, And Muslims From The Ancient To The Modern World)



Synopsis

When Crusader armies on their way to the Holy Land attacked Jewish communities in the Rhine Valley, many Jews chose suicide over death at the hands of Christian mobs. With their defiant deaths, the medieval Jewish martyr was born. With the literary commemoration of the victims, Jewish martyrology followed. *Beautiful Death* examines the evolution of a long-neglected corpus of Hebrew poetry, the laments reflecting the specific conditions of Jewish life in northern France. The poems offer insight into everyday life and into the ways medieval French Jews responded to persecution. They also suggest that poetry was used to encourage resistance to intensifying pressures to convert. The educated Jewish elite in northern France was highly acculturated. Their poetry--particularly that emerging from the innovative Tosafist schools--reflects their engagement with the vernacular renaissance unfolding around them, as well as conscious and unconscious absorption of Christian popular beliefs and hagiographical conventions. At the same time, their extraordinary poems signal an increasingly harsh repudiation of Christianity's sacred symbols and beliefs. They reveal a complex relationship to Christian culture as Jews internalized elements of medieval culture even while expressing a powerful revulsion against the forms and beliefs of Christian life. This gracefully written study crosses traditional boundaries of history and literature and of Jewish and general medieval scholarship. Focusing on specific incidents of persecution and the literary commemorations they produced, it offers unique insights into the historical conditions in which these poems were written and performed.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I read this book for the first time in 2002, when it was originally published, and I have gone back to read it, in full, and at other times in part, at various times over the past eight years. This is an inspiring and fascinating book, one that has taught me much. Einbinder is an innovative scholar who engages deeply with primary sources, and the questions this book raises are as important as the issues it resolves. I believe, moreover, that this book will appeal to specialists as well as to non-specialists. The general reader will find the prose both accessible and enjoyable and will be able to appreciate the content and analysis of the book knowing that it has been extremely well-received by expert scholars from many different universities.

I'm beginning to think the word 'nuanced' should be banned from academic discourse, and the word 'fanciful' employed more often. Einbinder is guilty to an absurd extent of building fanciful arguments on mere shreds of evidence (a good example is chapter 4, in which the existence of the three-word Hebrew phrase 'al-asher ne'enas' is used as the platform for a wordy hypothesis that the poem is dedicated to a martyr who was forcibly converted to Christianity and then burned when he reverted to Judaism etc etc..this makes it the only poem she knows of to extol a forced convert, which means x which means y...too bad she ignores her own warning that it would 'be foolhardy' to 'sound..with conviction' her 'tentative conclusions' (p115) about this, as about so many other verses analysed in this book).Another, related vice is that of pushing implausible interpretations of texts to suit her prior agenda. Thus,in chap. 3 she claims that Maharam's extraordinary lament on the burning of the Talmud in 1240 was influenced by the courtly love literature of the time - and it would be very interesting if she could indeed show it. But in fact, her argument is entirely unconvincing. I tried it out on someone who knows such courtly literature well, who was also unable to see the analogy Einbinder tries to make.Furthermore, her prose style is frequently pretentious and often clumsy. It is not enough to be constantly admitting that one's arguments are 'speculative'; when the ratio of substance to verbiage, of sound argument to airy hypothesis is as small as this, you have a problem. Why does she even get away with this? Well, not too many people have analysed such poetry at all...especially in English! But that doesn't make it OK. Altogether, a very frustrating read.

The author and her editors are to be faulted however, for the lack of the full texts of the poems discussed, as appendices, or in any manner. It wouldn't have killed them, to have included the

Hebrew texts, transliterations, and good English translations as appendices. This is a substantive omission. I was intimately involved with the production of the University Of California's edition of The Complete Works Of John Dryden - and other scholarly publications that were tools for scholars. In regard to the usual scholarly apparatus, or for serious readers, Someone at Princeton University Press did not fulfill all their editorial responsibilities in regard to this collection.

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