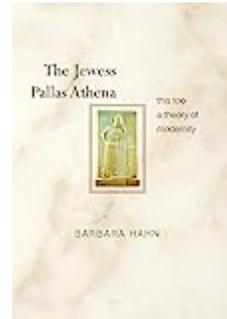


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Barbara Hahn. *The Jewess Pallas Athena: This Too a Theory of Modernity.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. 248 pp. \$37.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-11614-3.



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Published on H-German (September, 2006)

To Know and Redeem

The brilliance of Barbara Hahn's new book is breathtaking. As a work of archival scholarship, it is a remarkable recovery of major, hitherto-unknown chapters in the history of German Jews and of German-Jewish women. As a work of theory, it is an extraordinary demonstration of how the impact of memory on history should be integrated into historiography. This combination makes Hahn's book one of the most important works of Jewish feminist scholarship and a model for future scholarship.

While the salons run by the famous trio of Berlin Jewish women in the late eighteenth century are well known and have been invoked in ways that at times veered dangerously on kitsch, Hahn revisits them in a thoughtful, serious analysis they deserve. Her critique of Deborah Hertz's romanticized and, as Hahn argues, Petra Wilhelmy's trivialized presentation is well taken. The problem with prior scholarship, Hahn rightly points out, is a naïve reading of the sources, a failure to ask "whether the accounts in letters, autobiographies, and historical novels are reliable" (p. 49). Her critique of the scholarship is rooted in the problem that faces many schol-

ars of women's history: in the longing to uncover scraps of evidence regarding women, scholarly skepticism gives way to eager appropriation. Contemporary cultural priorities further influence the historian; Hahn notes the difference between Hannah Arendt's study of Rahel Varnhagen, written in the 1930s, where the garret salon represents "the failure of acculturation," and the studies that have appeared since the 1980s, in which the garret salon "becomes the symbol of a successful coexistence between Germans and Jews around 1800" (p. 48).

Yet even as Hahn reconstructs the remarkable story of forgotten women, she also investigates the cultural meaning of forgetting, particularly within the fraught German memory of Jews, women, and, above all, "Jewesses." Her story begins not with the usual genuflection toward the Mendelssohn-Lessing, male-male friendship as entry of the Jew to the Christian-German world, but with the utterly obscure story of Anna Constanze, Countess of Cosel, who, a generation earlier, had become a learned scholar of Judaism. After her death in 1765 the question was raised: was she a Jew or a Christian? She had learned Hebrew and Yiddish and followed the dietary

laws, but had she formally converted? Could one remain a Christian with such devotion to Judaism? Or was she in fact what a true Christian was intended to be, at least if the historical Jesus, a good Jew, served as the model?

The blurring of these boundaries was precisely the fear that dominated the lives of Jews and Christians. Prussia had enacted careful legislation to maintain the boundary between the two religions. When the daughters of a Jewish Berlin banker converted to Christianity in 1788, but then wished to return to the Jewish community, anxieties were aroused on all sides. For a Jew to convert to Christianity held one sort of meaning to the state; to abandon that conversion was a shock and a request that baffled the state's bureaucracy. The incident led to years of petitions and disputes, resulting in a change in the meaning of "Christian" and "Jewish," Hahn writes. One of the sisters, Sophie von Grotthuss, who later in life carried on an extensive correspondence with Goethe, fell in love with a Christian merchant. Her parents, horrified at her closeness to a Christian man, consulted Moses Mendelssohn for advice. He, the great figure of religious tolerance whose friendship with Lessing was touted as inaugurating a new era in Jewish-Christian relations, demanded that she break off her relationship with the young man and threw her copy of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* out the window. Was his religious tolerance limited to relationships between men? Mendelssohn's behavior toward Sophie von Grotthuss might help us understand his relationship with his daughter, Dorothea, leader of one of the famed Berlin salons of her day, and perhaps give us insight into the motives for her conversion to Christianity.

The trio of Berlin salonnières around 1800 has been promoted as a brief, iconic moment ever since Michael A. Meyer's *Origins of the Modern Jew* (1967). Hahn, however, places the salons in a longer and wider framework. She has discovered numerous other Jewish women in Germany, from the eighteenth century until the final catastrophe, who were themselves intellectuals, corresponded with other intellectuals, and hosted salons of cultural significance. She also examines the reflections

of German-Jewish women on the meaning of their identities, including forgotten works such as the distinguished Jewish historian Selma Stern's long-neglected series of essays, published in 1922, on "types" of Jewish women, which concludes with Stern's prediction that they will "know and redeem." (p. 104).

One archive, for example, yielded a set of letters from Gertrud Kantorowicz, who was deported to Theresienstadt in 1942, to Margarete Susman, who emigrated to Switzerland in 1933, which Hahn notes is unique as a collection of correspondence between intellectual women in the twentieth century (p. 87). Susman had reflected extensively on the meaning of Jewishness. In a remarkable essay she published in 1933 in the journal of the Jüdische Frauenbund, she describes exiting the world of Orthodox Jewish tradition, thanks to Mendelssohn, as leaving the realm of exile, Jewishness, and entering the realm of "the homelessness of a world after the death of God" (p. 106). Being a Jew, Hahn writes, is "to enter into a lack of differentiation that now affects everyone" (p. 107).

Hahn places the theorizing of Jewishness and of Jew-essness that she has uncovered in these and numerous other published and unpublished sources in the larger context of the tyranny of Greece over Germany. That figuration is epitomized by the Jewess Pallas Athena, the eponym assigned Rahel Varnhagen when her letters were published in 1834. In that image, which Hahn finds and probes within a poem by Paul Celan, she sees the interruption of the supposed contradiction between the Semitic and the Indo-Germanic, the Jewish and the Teutonic Aryan, and of the symbolic dangers of the Jewess in German thought, as foreign, ominous, and corrupting to German culture. Hahn writes, "If a Jewish woman can be the German Pallas Athena, contraries have been united" (p. 9). Hahn has written a hauntingly beautiful book, a work of discovery and extraordinary insight. Her work not only provides hitherto-unknown archival treasures to the historian, but also new ways of theorizing Germans, Jews and gender.

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Citation: Susannah Heschel. Review of Hahn, Barbara, *The Jewess Pallas Athena: This Too a Theory of Modernity*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2006.

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