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Erika Rummel. *The Case Against Johann Reuchlin: Religious and Social Controversy in Sixteenth-Century Germany.* Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2002. xvi + 174 pp. $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8020-8484-2.

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One approaches a book on events in sixteenth-century German intellectual history by Erika Rummel with high expectations. Rummel has established herself as an interpreter of the intellectual conflicts within the republic of letters of the early-sixteenth century as it intersected with the rising tide of Reformation rhetoric and politics. Her previous work elucidates some of the most important issues of the intellectual ferment in early modern Europe, devoting special attention to the personalities and milieu of German universities. Her books are notable for their clarity of exposition and a refusal to adhere to any rigid methodological school. In the book under review, Rummel attempts to use the Pfefferkorn-Reuchlin controversy of the early decades of the sixteenth century as a case study for the eclectic approach that she employs in her full-length scholarly work. The core of the book is its collection of primary texts, brief translated selections corresponding to the main strands of the controversy. A very brief preface (pp. vii-xi) is the only overview of the affair in sustained narrative fashion. The preface adumbrates a feature of the book that I view as a drawback–it simply does not provide enough narrative material to make the episode come to life. The subtitle of the narrative portion of the book, "The Reuchlin Affair in Context," provides a rather fractured attempt to show that the controversy can be viewed from multiple perspectives. Since that entire section contains fewer than forty pages divided into five chapters, this book cannot suffice as an introduction to any of the important subject areas related to the primary text selections: the status of Jews in the early modern Habsburg Empire, the humanist-scholastic controversies, and Luther's Reformation. In this regard, the conception of the book is superior to its execution. In attempting to pare down and further simplify a complex subject, Rummel fails to give the uninitiated the vital background information needed to form judgments about the nature of the controversy and the stature of Johannes Reuchlin.

The first chapter, "Pfefferkorn and the Battle against Judaism," introduces Johannes Pfefferkorn with biographical details rather than with a sense of where he belongs on a long continuum of Dominican efforts to exploit former Jews in their attempt to eradicate Jews and Judaism from Christian society. Fresh from a triumph that culminated in the expulsion or conversion of professing Muslims and Jews in the Iberian Peninsula, they turned their attention to the last professing Jews on Western European soil (outside of the Italian lands), the Jews of the Holy Roman Empire. Rummel notes that the Dominicans of Cologne sponsored Pfefferkorn's books and his career, but there is virtually no mention of the centuries-long campaign to deprive Jews of their books as a prelude to their increased isolation

and ultimate expulsion. Her characterization of Christian Europeans as "xenophobic" with "a lynch mentality," scants recent scholarship that carefully analyzes how late medieval Europeans came to form violent societies. The "masses," however, were not factors in the Reuchlin-Pfefferkorn controversy.[1] Many of Pfefferkorn's arguments and tactics date back to the grand religious disputations staged by the same monastic orders that supported him. Reuchlin's defense of the right of Jews to their books,and the right of humanists to use them for scholarly purposes, was courageous for any Christian to undertake in that incendiary atmosphere which Rummel describes so well in other works.

The second chapter traces how Reuchlin's defense of the rights of Jews within the empire became entangled with the cause of humanistic scholarship. Rummel describes Reuchlin's defense of Jews as an "offhand" reply without highlighting the uniqueness of his stance. Reuchlin was not a philosemite by any means, so that his eloquent defense of the rights of Jews to exist in the Empire with their books intact went as far as any believing Christian could articulate in a public declaration.

In the third chapter Rummel briefly shows how the humanist defense of Reuchlin entangled the protagonists in a much more high-stakes engagement, as Catholic scholastics attempted to link humanism with Luther's Reformation. Rummel has written an excellent book on this subject, *The Humanist-Scholastic Debate in the Renaissance and Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) and the careful reader can detect echoes of that earlier analysis of humanist temporizing in the face of threats to their positions. The fourth chapter reviews the several ways in which the case was construed by sixteenth century contemporaries or participants. Pfefferkorn and his Dominican sponsors saw the controversy as one concerning the continued existence of Judaism and Jews within European Christendom. Reuchlin justified his stance as a defense of academic liberty and humanist truth seeking. The most contrived construction, in Rummel's view, emanated from Catholic theologians who deliberately linked Reuchlin, and through him, humanism, to Luther's Reformation platform. Erasmus, who believed it to be a false position that would unjustly harm the cause of humanism, had early on denounced this interpretation.

The last chapter summarizes modern (nineteenth century and beyond) historians' evaluations of the role of the controversy in the sixteenth century. I would quibble only with her discussion of whether historians who were "ethnic Jews" viewed the Pfefferkorn-Reuchlin controversy as more central to humanism than other aspects of the sixteenth-century humanist dispute. Heinrich Graetz was not merely an "ethnic Jew" but a pioneering historian of the Jewish people, albeit one who operated with certain distorting agendas. Unlike many of the figures Rummel evaluates, Graetz viewed Pfefferkorn within the perspective of the centuries-old history of Jewish-Christian disputation, which was always weighted against the Jews and usually resulted in the confiscation and burning of their books. Pfefferkorn tried to perpetuate the truly frightful legacy of self-hatred on the part of converts out of Judaism and of Christian malevolence. This is not a question of Graetz's ethnicity but of his sensitivity to a diachronic strand of history.

The introductory material is followed by the heart of the book, the translations from primary sources. These include excerpts from Pfefferkorn's writings, from Reuchlin's defense of Jewish books, from the still hilarious satire *Letters of Obscure Men*, and others. The translations are generally careful, if a bit wooden. It is unclear for which readers this book is intended: the introductory material is too scanty for use as an undergraduate introduction, while the annotation is too light and the selections too small for serious analysis on a higher level. The book is best used as an adjunct to other works on the main themes, including Rummel's. Without privileging any single view of the controversy she shows how many different historical strands are interwoven into one celebrated episode. These were further complicated by the diverse and often contradictory impulses driving its interpreters in the sixteenth century, as well as in our own.

Note:

[1]. See, for example, David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

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