

Figural Judaism and Political Thought in the Marquis d'Argens's *Lettres juives*

Catherine R. Power

Abstract: Despite its immense popularity at the time of publication in the 1730s, the marquis d'Argens's (Jean-Baptiste de Boyer) *Lettres juives* is largely overlooked by contemporary political theorists and the history of political thought. The *Lettres'* contribution is noteworthy in its multilayered literary presentation incorporating many of the polemics and paradoxes of Enlightenment ideas. It is also significant as an early example of one way that post-Christian thought made use of imagined Jews and Judaism to articulate, debate, and popularize philosophical and political ideas. In this paper, I submit that d'Argens appropriated Christian figural Judaism in the service of secular philosophical inquiry. D'Argens's imagined "Jew in speech" proved to be a fertile ground upon which to conceptualize and debate post-Christian ideas about human nature and secular politics that subsequent diverse thinkers would make use of in the centuries that followed.

Though now often overlooked in the history of political thought, the collected *Correspondances critiques et philosophiques* (1735–49) by Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, the marquis d'Argens, is a complex, multivocal philosophical rumination of surprising value. The first of the three epistolary novels that constitute the *Correspondances*, the *Lettres juives* (Jewish letters) is particularly significant as an early example, if not the first popular instance, of one way that modern political thought has made use of imagined Jews and Judaism to articulate, debate, and popularize philosophical and political ideas. Filled with moments of keen satire and wit, the *Lettres* was intended by d'Argens as a way of further popularizing ascendant Enlightenment values of anticlericalism, reason, and progress.

Catherine R. Power is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Glendon College, York University, 2275 Bayview Avenue, Toronto, ON, Canada M4N 3M6 (Catherine.power@mail.utoronto.ca).

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The characters in the *Lettres* explicitly laud authors such as Pierre Bayle, who are described as having the ability to render even the most complex ideas accessible and “clear” — such that “even a woman” could understand them.¹ In the later *Philosophie du bon sens*, d’Argens wrote more about the importance of the “art” of making complex concepts understandable even to the most “ordinary minds.”² The anticlericalism, deism, and cosmopolitanism of the *Lettres* are all positions that were becoming common currency among the intellectuals and philosophes of the early Enlightenment. The *Lettres*’ significance thus rests more in its form of representation and argumentation than in the uniqueness of the ideas presented.

Moreover, the *Lettres* holds pride of place in the modern appropriation of a powerful rhetorical tool and framework that had been in use by Christian thinkers for millennia. D’Argens cleverly exploited the pre-existing connotations associated with Judaism in the Christian imaginary while constructing his own anticlerical versions of figural Jews and Judaism.³ He thus translated a dominant Christian framework into an assertively modern way of formulating and theorizing increasingly salient questions about the human condition and the kinds of politics best suited to it. D’Argens’s appropriation of the Christian figure of the Jew went on to become a powerful rhetorical and conceptual tool for political thinkers and polemicists in the following centuries — most notably in the form of the Jewish Question.⁴ Though a full account of

¹Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d’Argens, *Lettres juives*, ed. Jacques Marx, 3 vols. (Paris: Champion, 2013), L 26, 332. References to the *Lettres* will henceforth be given parenthetically in the text. Translations are my own.

²Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d’Argens, *La philosophie du bon sens*, ed. Guillaume Pigéard de Gurbert (Paris: Champion, 2002), 56.

³Erich Auerbach’s discussion of *figura* analyzes the key hermeneutical and cosmological work done by Christian figural interpretation of the Bible: “Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses and fulfils the first” (Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984], 58). The position of the Jew as both prefiguration of Christ’s new covenant and warning of the consequences of rejecting it made the figural Jew particularly powerful in Christian discourses and thought, taking on a life of its own well beyond the biblical text (David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* [New York: Norton, 2013]). See, for example, the myriad ways that the Jew is invoked in medieval sermons (Joan Young Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews: Reflections of the Other in Medieval Sermon Stories* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997]).

⁴Jay Geller, *The Other Jewish Question: Identifying the Jew and Making Sense of Modernity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011); Enzo Traversa, *The Marxists and the Jewish Question: The History of a Debate, 1843–1943* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1994); Johnathan Judaken, *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question: Anti-antisemitism and the Politics of the French Intellectual* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2006); Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Dark Riddle: Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Jews*

why the “Jew” became increasingly the focus of so much attention in modern political thought is well beyond the scope of this paper, the ubiquity and significance of the figure of the Jew in political thought and politics after d’Argens makes his original appropriation of the figure deeply significant in the history and development of modern political thought.⁵

There are myriad ways to analyze the appearance of Jews and Judaism in the *Lettres*, but to date there has been no dedicated study of the way d’Argens uses his figural Jews to make or challenge political and philosophical ideas. In his brief discussion of the marquis d’Argens, Jonathan Israel assesses whether d’Argens’s depiction of Jews and Judaism in the *Lettres* is antisemitic, though he largely leaves aside the possibility that the figure of the Jew itself is productive for d’Argens.⁶ Arthur Hertzberg’s analysis is also chiefly concerned with assessing whether d’Argens’s characters or statements are antisemitic.⁷ There is, though, a growing body of scholarship that focuses on the broader importance of Judaism in the history of political thought and philosophy beyond antisemitism.⁸ Adam Sutcliffe’s study, *Judaism and Enlightenment* surveys the myriad and conflicting attitudes of early modern and Enlightenment thinkers toward Judaism and the relation between their discussions of “textual Judaism” and contemporary Jews of their own time.⁹ For Sutcliffe, “the apparent cosmopolitanism of Argens’ representation of Judaism is ultimately self-undermining, because it is based on the assertion of a philosophical universalism that erases all traces of actual Jewish difference.”¹⁰ D’Argens’s purported valorization of difference is belied by his erasure of actual Judaism and Jews. These studies that focus on the qualities of d’Argens’s depiction of Judaism and Jews are invaluable, but there is much more to say about what d’Argens is doing in the *Lettres*. Focusing our analytic lens on the

(University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998); Robert Fine and Philip Spencer, *Antisemitism and the Left: On the Return of the Jewish Question* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017); Hannah Arendt, introduction to *Illuminations*, by Walter Benjamin (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), as well as Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah* (New York: Grove, 1978).

⁵See, e.g., Michael Mack, *German Idealism and the Jew: The Inner Anti-semitism of Philosophy and the German Jewish Responses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁶Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 586–87.

⁷Arthur Hertzberg, *The French Enlightenment and the Jews: The Origins of Modern Anti-Semitism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 278–80.

⁸David J. Wertheim, *The Jew as Legitimation* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Sarah Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); and others discussed below.

⁹Adam Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 210.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 211.

constructive work that d'Argens's Jews do in the text allows us to better understand the diversity of the rhetorical and conceptual potential of the "Jew" in political thought, both in the Enlightenment thought of d'Argens and the many appearances of figural Jews and Judaism up to the present day.¹¹

I will provide a brief overview of the long history of the Christian imaginary's construction and utilizations of the figural Jew and Judaism along with how the figure of the Jew developed some of its powerful associations and connotations. I will look at how d'Argens's appropriation of the figure of the Jew departs from political Hebraism and traditional Christian thought while creatively exploiting the diverse connotations of figural Judaism to do philosophical work. This will be followed by a discussion of the marquis d'Argens and his contemporary reception as well as a sketch of the *Lettres'* figural Jews as rhetorical, conceptual tools. Finally, I will demonstrate how d'Argens uses his "Jews" in the text to challenge contemporary Christian dogmas and explore questions of human nature and the proper relationship between the church and temporal politics.¹²

The Figure of the Jew from its Christian Origins to the *Lettres*

Long positioned as the quintessential Other, the figural Jew was an immensely powerful rhetorical and hermeneutical form in Christian discourses.¹³ David Nirenberg traces the development of the figural Jew amid the struggles of the early disciples and the church to establish themselves vis-à-vis their fellow Jews who had rejected the divinity of Jesus.¹⁴ After doing the hard work of distinguishing themselves from their Jewish brethren socially and politically (forming their own congregations, distancing themselves politically as unlike the rebellious Jews that the Romans were finding ever more troublesome), early Christians still faced the more profound task of codifying what would come to be catholic canon, dogma, and practice.

¹¹An excellent example of this kind of analysis with regard to contemporary thought is Sarah Hammerschlag's exegesis of Badiou, "Bad Jews, Authentic Jews, Figural Jews," in *Judaism, Liberalism, and Political Theology*, ed. Randi Rashkover and Martin Kavka (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 221–39; Cynthia M. Baker provides a genealogy of the term itself in *Jew* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017).

¹²Jean-François Lyotard (*Heidegger et «les juifs»* [Paris: Galilée, 1988]) uses the form "jews," in quotation marks and lowercase, to flag that he is speaking of a figural Judaism specifically. His work not only comments on the place of figural Judaism in thought, but also self-consciously makes use of it. As this article seeks to do only the former, I occasionally use quotation marks to flag that I am not attempting any sort of ethnographic analysis of real-world Judaism or Jews, but I have generally kept the capitalized proper noun throughout.

¹³Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama*, esp. 51–60.

¹⁴Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*, 464.

Hermeneutics emerged as a key method of contestation, with competing Christian sects vying for authority as the authentic interpreters of God's word.¹⁵ Derived from the Pauline logic that associated Judaism with the "law" that "kills" versus the Christian "spirit that brings life," a system of thought developed within which "law, language, and flesh [were] typed as Jewish."¹⁶ Decoupling "Jewishness" from actual Jews allowed for what may seem at first glance the odd situation of church elders and theologians routinely accusing political and theological opponents of "Judaizing" and being themselves "Jews" (e.g., Saint Ambrose claiming of the Christian emperor Maximus that "the king has become a Jew" for attempting to punish the Christian arson of a synagogue in Callinicum in 388 CE).¹⁷

Out of the internecine jockeying for hegemony of ideas among the early church fathers, Augustine's answer to Origenist dualism regarding the proper understanding of Jews and Judaism in Christian history emerged as a central aspect of church dogma for the centuries that followed. According to Augustine, the "Jews," though most assuredly damned for denying the Christ, ought to be left alive (ideally in misery) because they still have a crucial part to play in God's plan as *witnesses* to the very divinity that they, in their blind narcissism, reject. Like Cain, the Jews are marked by their sin and damned to wander the earth as the anachronistic Other, cast from history, "so to the end of the seven days of time the continued preservation of the Jews will be a proof to believing Christians of the subjection merited by those who ... put the Lord to death."¹⁸ Jews are eternally stuck in the moment where they set themselves at odds with God, a wandering anachronism whose stubborn refusal to change is both the cause of their punishment and that which saves them from annihilation—at least until the second coming.

For much of Christian history and thought, the Jew was necessarily a negative, and at times evil, foil to Christianity. The Jew was often portrayed as miserable *Synagoga*, the eternally punished, itinerant witness to the true divinity of Christ and to the transference of the original covenant to its Christian spiritual descendants.¹⁹ The association of Judaism with materiality,

¹⁵Ibid., esp. 80–134.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., 117–18.

¹⁸Augustine's letter *Against Faustus*, quoted in Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*, 130.

¹⁹*Ecclesia* and *Synagoga* were feminine figural representations of Christianity and Judaism (the church and the synagogue) popular in medieval art. See Stephen Haynes, *Jews and the Christian Imagination* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 33–55; James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 181–82; cf. Robert Chazan's discussion of Christian philosemitism, "Philosemitic Tendencies in Medieval Western Christendom," in *Philosemitism in History*, ed. Adam Sutcliffe and Johnathan Karp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

blindness / blind obedience to superficial, meaningless formal law, and obstinacy remained as foundational elements of supersessionist theology and cosmology for subsequent Christian thought and philosophy until the early modern period and Enlightenment. These existing connotative associations of figural Jews and Judaism would prove irresistible rhetorical and cognitive resources for philosophers and polemicists to challenge Christian dogma and institutions and to think through what a modern way of being might or ought to look like.

Early modern thinkers had found inspiration and assumed authority in the texts of the Hebrew Bible. Hobbes and his successors employed novel hermeneutics to the text of the Hebrew Bible itself to envision a “Hebrew” model of politics and sovereignty.²⁰ Yet, however novel or idiosyncratic the exegeses of early modern thinkers such as Hobbes and Harrington, they were bound by the limits of working within a fixed, canonical text, the Bible—even if creatively reinterpreted. By shifting focus from the words of the Hebrew Bible to figural representations of the Hebrew nation or the Jew, philosophers could go beyond novel biblical exegesis while ostensibly still making use of the familiar conceptual tools of a traditional Christian framework and its long-established construction of the figural Jew and Judaism. The Jew, in other words, could serve as a metaphor and metonym for a wider range of ideas, expanding the kinds of critique or experimental supposition that a thinker could engage in without alienating his or her Christian audience.

Ronald Schechter, taking up the idea from Levi-Strauss, calls this rhetorical or figural Judaism “good to think.”²¹ Two prominent aspects of figural Judaism make it particularly exploitable for thinking through and framing modern questions about human existence and political life. First, the language of figural Judaism is nearly ubiquitous in a Christian context. The Jew had existed as the representational embodiment of a host of abstract ideas, fears, and sins for centuries in Christian liturgical and theological writings, and in popular folklore and song. The Jew was familiar, “known to epitomize commerce, carnality, religious and ‘national’ zeal, hairsplitting casuistry, moral corruption, and dissimulation in particular.”²² Second, the Jew proved so useful for thinkers precisely because of the especially paradoxical connotations that Judaism had obtained throughout the centuries. The Jew is simultaneously bloodthirsty and violent, as in the *blood libel*; yet the

²⁰See Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Ronald Beiner, “James Harrington on the Hebrew Commonwealth,” *Review of Politics* 76 (2014): 169–93; Meirav Jones and Yossi Shain, “Modern Sovereignty and the Non-Christian, or Westphalia’s Jewish State,” *Review of International Studies* 43, no. 5 (2017): 918–38.

²¹Ronald Schechter, *Obstinate Hebrews: Representations of Jews in France, 1715–1815* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 7.

²²*Ibid.*, 8.

Jew is also passive, emasculated, effeminate. The Jew is the consummate insular tribalist and yet the consummate wandering cosmopolitan. The Jew is irrationally pious and disconnected from the world and yet also the very embodiment of misguided materialism and heteronomy.²³ The Jew is infamously wealthy, greedily controlling commerce, and yet known for itinerant poverty. Providing both the advantages of a familiar, trusted set of assumptions and the diversity of a host of dichotomies that suited Enlightenment binaries, the figural Jew itself became a conceptual space within which to think as well as a way of thinking about the world. This way of thinking is, to use Nirenberg's formulation, "a powerful theoretical framework for making sense of the world."²⁴

The *Lettres juives* is among the earliest examples of this modern iteration of the older Christian way of framing big questions about nation, state, religion, and human nature. Since using a framework necessarily reinforces it, speaking the connotative language of figural Judaism allows d'Argens to appeal to his readers by reinforcing a powerful set of assumptions they hold about the world. D'Argens reaffirms Christian ideas about the Jew and Judaism while nevertheless presenting his at times radical critiques of religion and a new faith in human progress and reason. Saturated with Christian dogmatic, Orientalist, and biblical connotative associations, d'Argens's Jews prove a particularly useful site for articulating and communicating salient Enlightenment philosophical debates and ideas to a wider audience.

The Marquis d'Argens and the *Lettres*

Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, the marquis d'Argens, was born in *Aix-en-Provence* in 1704. Expected to follow in his father's footsteps, d'Argens received a legal training and the usual aristocratic education for his time and position. From early on, the young marquis chafed at the restrictions and expectations of his role. D'Argens's formative years involved a failed elopement to Spain (foiled as a result of the collusion of the church with the *ancien-régime* law that empowered his father to annul his son's unapproved marriage to a poor opera singer of renowned beauty), a year's sojourn in Constantinople, and the accumulation of a fair amount of debt.²⁵ The disappointment of his

²³Mack, *German Idealism and the Jew*, 23–41.

²⁴Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*, 464.

²⁵D'Argens wrote of his own misadventures and heartbreak in his 1735 *Mémoires du marquis d'Argens avec quelques lettres sur divers sujets*. At least one biographer has attempted to unsettle the reputation for *libertinage* that d'Argens acquired, but whether his tales of attempted temporary "wife"-swapping and dealings with "Jewish" pimps in Constantinople are exaggerations, his youthful adventures were clearly at odds with prevailing religious and societal norms. See Julia Gasper, *The Marquis d'Argens: A Philosophical Life* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

first failed elopement was not to be repeated. D'Argens eloped with a second bride, also an operatic performer, to the low country beyond the authority of his father, the French ancien régime, and the Catholic Church. D'Argens turned to writing to support himself after being disinherited a second (and final) time and now with a wife to keep in Amsterdam. The strident anticlericalism that Jonathan Israel highlights in d'Argens, aligning him firmly on the "radical" side of Enlightenment, is perhaps a reflection of his personal experiences of the Catholic Church's imbrication with temporal authorities.²⁶

D'Argens wrote the letters that would eventually form the full *Correspondances critiques et philosophiques* while living in exile in Amsterdam. They proved a commercial and popular success at the time, earning its author a virtual place in the *république des lettres* and a literal place at the court of Frederick (soon to be "the Great") where he went on to receive several honors and the personal attention of the monarch for many years.²⁷ The *Correspondances* consists of three epistolary "novels" (though largely lacking the straightforward narrative structure that we might expect of the novel form today): *Lettres juives*, *Lettres cabalistiques*, *Lettres chinoises*. Originally published in serial subscription form beginning in late 1735, the first novel in the series, the *Lettres juives*, was quickly collected and released in volumes of thirty letters each. The original Amsterdam publisher produced 2100 copies of volume 5 alone in 1735. Another ten editions (at least) of the complete *Lettres* in French, both official and pirated, had been published by 1739.²⁸ Emulating the premise of Montesquieu's well-known *Lettres persanes*, published a decade earlier in 1721, the *Correspondances* was presented as a collection of personal correspondences between peripatetic foreigners. The actual author, marquis d'Argens, presents himself as the humble and impartial translator of letters that could at times contain radical critiques of prevailing religious, social, and political institutions and societal *moeurs*.

Like Montesquieu's *Lettres*, d'Argens's *Lettres* includes commentary on a diverse array of subjects. In more than two hundred letters, the Jews, Aaron Monceca (an Ottoman Jew beginning his European journey in France), Jacob Brito (a Genovese Jew traveling through Italy), and the sage Rabbi Isaac Onis in Constantinople discuss, debate, and comment on prevailing French, Italian, and other *moeurs* and politics, literary and cultural gossip, ideas of virtue, religion, dogma, faith, the church, the proper functioning of a state or regime, human nature and human perfectibility, the nature of God and the universe, and more.²⁹ Montesquieu's *Lettres* has been explored in

²⁶Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 586–87.

²⁷Gaspar, *Marquis d'Argens*, 121–26.

²⁸Schechter, *Obstinate Hebrews*, 43.

²⁹The *Lettres* is ripe for a more detailed literary analysis than I will have time to do here. For example, d'Argens's choice of names is undoubtedly significant. Isaac, the favored son who inherits his brother's birthright, is a nod to Christian interpretations of Isaac as a prefiguration of Christ. Aaron, the first high priest of Israel and progenitor

terms of the ways it both exemplifies and complicates European Orientalism.³⁰ D'Argens's *Lettres* also contains many classically Orientalist tropes, but by choosing to speak through "Jewish" voices, the marquis d'Argens is working beyond the traditional framework of Orientalism.

While the figure of the Jew in eighteenth-century France was in many ways that of a reviled, anachronistic *outsider* (the Oriental other), the long and complicated supersessionist history within Christianity vis-à-vis Jews and Judaism meant that, for d'Argens's predominantly Catholic and Christian audience, the Jew was in many ways an *internal outsider*.³¹ D'Argens could use the established connotations that Judaism and Jews brought with them in the Christian imaginary to his own rhetorical advantage. As Adam Sutcliffe notes, "Monceca and his correspondents are less closely associated with an exotically alien culture. Jewish difference ... jostles with Jewish sameness, while the transnational nature of European Jewry ... reinforces Argens' portrayal of his characters as the most natural and perfect cosmopolitans."³² The figure of the Jew could be both familiar and cosmopolitan in ways that the Muslim "oriental" figure often could not. D'Argens exploits the versatile and Oriental connotations associated with Judaism to support and at times convey his philosophical positions. He constructs his Jews as existing literally in both the Occidental and Oriental worlds (with his characters in Europe corresponding with each other and the "rabbi" back in Constantinople), while also playing with the reader's assumptions about the meaning of both in terms of history and progress. Not just a strange other against whom to construct an Occidental modernity, the Jews in the *Lettres* are themselves a cognitive space within which d'Argens is able to work through complex ideas. This conceptual and philosophical work happens both via the dialogue of his Jewish characters and via the drama of the work, that is to say, the actions taken by his rhetorical Jews. By way of illustrative example, I highlight just two of the central philosophical issues that animate the *Lettres juives*:

of the priestly line, is ironically the character whose criticisms of the fantasies and "chimeras" of religion are the most biting. Aaron's last name, Monceca, is likely a nod in the direction of the minor character, Fonseca, in *Don Quixote*, assumed to be named after a known "Spanish" Jewish doctor.

³⁰Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1995); Suzanne L. Pucci, "Orientalism and Representations of Exteriority in Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*," *The Eighteenth Century* 26, no. 3 (1985): 263–79; Lisa Lowe, "Rereadings in Orientalism: Oriental Inventions and Inventions of the Orient in Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*," *Cultural Critique*, no. 15 (1990): 115–43.

³¹For discussions of Orientalism with regard to Jews and Judaism, see Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek J. Penslar Kalmar, *Orientalism and the Jews* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005), esp. xiii–xviii and 49–50; Jeffrey S. Librett, *Orientalism and the Figure of the Jew* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

³²Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment*, 210.

human nature or the possibility of human perfectibility and the proper relationship between temporal political sovereigns and ecclesiastical authorities. D'Argens's choice to explore these issues via his rhetorical Jews enables him to at times explicitly appear to be reinforcing traditional ideas while simultaneously implicitly presenting a radical critique of them.

History and Human Perfectibility

D'Argens invokes (and thus reinforces) the old Christian figure of the eternal Jew inured to the vicissitudes of history or culture. Aaron Monceca on his way to Paris, writing to the rabbi Isaac Onis in Constantinople, muses on the differences between French "Nazarene" (Christian), Jewish, and Muslim women. Whereas French women are almost slavishly modish and inconstant, "Jewish" women are resolutely constant. "Have you ever reflected, my dear Isaac, upon the character of Jewish women? They are the only [women] in the universe upon whom the *moeurs* of a country have no influence" (L 1, 173). Stability to the point of stasis is lauded in Jewish women and as a virtue more generally. Throughout the letters, explicit statements affirming the value of remaining steadfast in one's own practices and traditions recur. Expressing derision for a French Nazarene convert to Islam, Aaron proclaims that "a gentleman ought to live and die in the religion to which Heaven ordained he be born" (L 23, 317). Conversion or any inconstancy in one's nature is to be viewed with suspicion. Profound change to one's being is dismissed as very likely unsustainable and certainly undesirable. D'Argens's Jews at first appear to predictably confirm the reader's assumptions about the stubborn, Jewish commitment to a static way of being. However, d'Argens subtly introduces the question whether human nature itself is fixed or mutable via the recurring question of conversion and the implied possibility of a Jew or anyone else changing their religion, and thus their very soul.

As the correspondence develops, the fixed nature of the Jew is affirmed and then expanded to describe human nature more generally. Aaron reflects on how "men, my dear Isaac, have been the same throughout all the ages" (L 4, 196). D'Argens appears to be affirming the conventional understanding of human nature as largely fixed, but the picture begins to get a bit more complicated as each character starts describing the differing essential "characters" of different peoples and religious groups. Perhaps man is in some fundamental way just as God made him, but "Italians are, for some time now, generally ignorant and the Piedmontese are even more so" (L 37, 404). Further, Jacob writes to Aaron that it is not "surprising to see two neighboring peoples who speak the same tongue, who have the same *moeurs*, and even the same customs" differ so markedly in a characteristic like general intelligence (405). Where are we to find human nature in all this? How can we account for such a change in the expressed character of a given people? Having

already dismissed the notion that climate creates dispositions (contra Montesquieu), d'Argens suggests, speaking through Jacob again, that history has the power to shape human nature, or at least its particular expression.

Jacob explicitly lays the blame for the Piedmontese's vain, lazy, and passive disposition on the Inquisition (L 37, 405). We can presume that, for d'Argens's readership, a Jew taking umbrage at the Inquisition would have been unsurprising. But Jacob does not put forward the usual criticisms of the Inquisition as being terrible for the pain and fear it inflicted on its targets and victims—crypto-Jews and those accused of “judaizing.” Rather, we are to understand, a form of institutionalized violence and discipline like the Inquisition has broader, damaging effects on the society in which it operates—to the point of changing the very character of the people. In this instance, d'Argens is able to combine a comment on the contextual elements of human nature with his otherwise favorite pastime of inveighing against religion. Speaking through the “Jewish” voice, d'Argens is able to play on his audience's expectations while introducing the idea of a partially historicized human nature as part of a rather sophisticated critique of the Inquisition.³³ Human nature and the character of peoples are, in a profound and even constitutive way, yoked to the unfolding of history, but what about individual humans? According to d'Argens, can individuals be perfected?

While the characters routinely express doubts about the possibility of an individual human ever truly changing, especially changing one's religious identity and beliefs, the dramatic action of the novel conveys a more nuanced message. Though Aaron is by far the more passionately antireligious character in the correspondence,³⁴ d'Argens has the esteemed Rabbi Isaac Onis suddenly convert to Karaism after encountering and debating the authentic foundations of Judaism with an ecumenical council involving his nonrabbinic brethren.³⁵ Former rabbi-cum-Karaite Onis rejects the misguided “ceremonies and customs” of rabbinic Judaism, claiming to finally see that it has no basis in the authentic Mosaic law ordained by God (that is the exoteric, written law of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible). Onis thus understands

³³D'Argens's argument that violent, oppressive institutions can have a profoundly damaging effect on the character and cognition of the people in whose name they operate anticipates by more than two centuries Arendt's critique of what totalitarian violence can do to the ability of an entire people to “think” in the proper sense.

³⁴Aaron describes rabbinic law as “mistaken” (L 29, 347), “ridiculous opinions” (L 24, 320); even delving into the kinds of banal anti-Jewish charges of greed and materialism that recur until today, writing that “the purpose of our [the Jews] prayers is wealth, abundance, and earthly goods” (L 29, 348).

³⁵Karaism is a minority sect of Judaism that did not accept the authority of rabbinic Judaism that developed following the destruction of the second temple. Karaites reject the “oral law” (i.e., the Mishnah and Gemarrah and commentaries that make up the Talmud).

that rabbinic Judaism “has no foundation aside from the chimerical visions of a few of our ancestors” (L 44, 450). He appears to be a Jew transformed.

This is a rather clever maneuver by d’Argens that requires unpacking. On the one hand, he affirms his readers’ anti-Jewish disdain for the Talmud without rejecting the Hebrew Bible that Jews and Christians have in common. On the other hand, d’Argens subverts the traditional Catholic Augustinian *idée fixe* of the Jew as eternal, unchanging anachronism. Schechter argues that “Isaac’s Karaism represents both radical change and radical hostility toward innovation. It embodies a dialectical synthesis of stasis and change, stubbornness and flexibility.”³⁶ Schechter is referring to the fact that Isaac has converted not to a new religion, but to what he believes to be the “purified” version of his old one. This notion of a “purified” form of Judaism is introduced quite early in the correspondence. Aaron writes to the rabbi Isaac about an “infinite number of Jews who are such without believing that they are” (L 4, 191). These Jews practice the Christian religion merely on the surface, but in their hearts, they subscribe to a simpler kind of deism. They believe in the one God and that he created the universe and rewards the good and punishes evil. They think that the soul is immortal. Later, Aaron asserts that, were the Chinese *philosophe* Confucius to find himself in Europe observing the “Jews,” he would judge the religious customs and rituals ridiculous. However, stripped of its “exterior” trappings, Confucius would recognize that “the Jew believes and follows that which most purified reason easily demonstrates.” Taking aim at rabbinic Judaism again, Aaron continues, “if in the rest of Jewish law he [Confucius] finds errors, he [would] blame them on the men who introduced them; he [would] distinguish the essential from the superficial” (L 29, 348).

Arthur Hertzberg argues that d’Argens is in fact putting forward a strongly anti-Jewish argument here. He summarizes d’Argens logic thus: “The Karaites, the Jewish sect who rejected the Talmud, were the most reasonable. Nothing was higher than the Jewish religion in its Karaite form ...; nothing was more detestable than the same religion as practiced by the majority of Jews, who follow the Talmud.”³⁷ This is a fair reading of the text and locates d’Argens near the head of a tradition of French *philosophes* who would reject Talmudic Judaism while finding it necessary to defend the value of the Hebrew Bible or at least a kind of rational deism that they could argue existed at its pre-Talmudic core and that it had passed on to Christianity.³⁸ Adam Sutcliffe similarly identifies the anti-Jewish element of

³⁶Schechter, *Obstinate Hebrews*, 46.

³⁷Hertzberg, *French Enlightenment and the Jews*, 279.

³⁸D’Argens appears to be influenced by Bayle (L 26). Diderot railed against the ancient Hebrews yet praised elements of the Hebrew Bible. See Leon Schwartz, *Diderot and the Jews* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1981). Voltaire was less willing to grant any value to Judaism, though he did claim that he could in theory tolerate a Jew who had renounced Judaism. See Adam Sutcliffe,

Rabbi Isaac's conversion to Karaism.³⁹ These observations accurately describe how d'Argens's *Lettres* contributed to Enlightenment cosmopolitan anti-Judaism, but they leave out how the portrayal of the transformation of a Jew into a purified, enlightened man necessarily implied the potential for human perfectibility at the individual level more generally. Certainly, the figure of the eternal Jew remains intact—indeed it must remain to provide the rhetorical, ironic drama of the narrative—but his radical transformation, acting so against type, draws the reader's attention to the broader question of human adaptability. Schechter views the question of human perfectibility as the central concern of the *Lettres*, which can be viewed as foregrounding the debates about *régénération* (of both Jews and Christians) that went on to become central to republican and revolutionary discussions of *citoyenneté* during the revolution. If even a Jew, the ultimate symbol of stubborn obstinacy and unchangeable anachronism, could become someone better, certainly a Christian could. Why not a Frenchman?

Separating the Church from the Sovereign

While the question of human perfectibility is, indeed, a central concern of the text, far more explicit attention is given to radical criticism of religion and of its place in politics and society. The *Lettres* warns specifically of the dangers that fanatical religion and religious authority pose to a just and peaceful political order. The characters delight in mocking the many “absurd” “superstitions” and rituals of religion, even musing about its eventual decline. D'Argens's decision to “speak” via “Jewish” characters allows him to highlight the absurdities of religion and its ability to corrupt politics not just in explicit polemics, but also by allowing moments of keen irony relating to anti-Jewish assumptions to do some of the rhetorical work. Sutcliffe argues that the “*faux-naïf* directness of its [the *Lettres juives*] Jewish voices” largely serves a comedic purpose in the text. It is true that some of the more hilarious moments are those where one of the “Jewish” correspondents dons his amateur anthropologist's pith helmet and sets about describing the funny and incomprehensible rituals of the “natives.” For example, Aaron describes his first experience of a Catholic mass in Paris as a piece of theater, complete with an audience equipped with opera glasses and what he assumes to be an

“Can a Jew Be a Philosopher? Isaac de Pinto, Voltaire, and Jewish Participation in the European Enlightenment,” *Jewish Social Studies* 6, no. 3 (200): 31–51. Arnold Ages concludes that Enlightenment thinkers, unaware of the Talmudic distinction between *halachic* (legal) discussions and *aggadic* (tales/lore) stories, dismissed the Talmud and rabbinic Judaism *in toto* as fanciful and irrational (Ages, *French Enlightenment and Rabbinic Tradition* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1970).

³⁹Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment*, 211.

actor in a funny hat (the priest, of course) who ironically riles up his audience with a passionate sermon about the evil temptations of *comédie* and “the dangers to which theater exposed one by exciting the passions” (L 4, 194). However, d’Argens exploits the plausible deniability of his “Jewish” personae to deliver sharp polemics against all three Abrahamic faiths and the “Nazarene” clergy. These polemics are often laced with another layer of irony for being delivered by “Jews.”

All three characters offer up biting criticisms of the outlandish and ridiculous beliefs and practices of religion, but Aaron Monceca and Jacob Brito quickly establish themselves as the radical foils against which the more learned and sedate Rabbi Isaac Onis can emerge as a voice of Enlightenment reason and moderation. While Aaron and Jacob compete with one another to demonstrate which “Nazarene” community has the more absurd ideas and customs (Paris, Rome, Florence, etc.), Isaac, both before and especially after his official declaration of Karaism, is the *philosophe* of the novel. The letters take on a recognizable pattern as they unfold. Aaron and Jacob wind each other up, each even explicitly daring the other to outdo him in their outlandish descriptions of “Nazarene” rituals. The wiser Isaac then weighs in as the moderate voice of more objective and detached reason. This is why Voltaire was wont to address d’Argens as “my dear Isaac” in letters.⁴⁰

As Sutcliffe notes, d’Argens takes ample advantage of the comedic element of the outsider Jew to “naively” describe serious and somber Christian rituals with ironic detachment. Jacob writes to Aaron from Rome describing the incredible sight of priests literally hitting penitents as they file by. A general staffing shortage is blamed for there not being enough priests to grant a private audience for the confessions of the endless stream of penitent pilgrims, so instead of the vicarious ear of God, the good Christian seekers receive the vicarious wooden strap of God instead. He ends the letter daring Aaron to respond and say if in France he sees rituals that approach the same level of “absurdity” (L 6, 206–7). From Moscow to Spain, our “Jewish” observers find an endless array of absurd rituals, blatantly hypocritical clergy, and credulous “Nazarenes” in thrall to “chimeras” and fantasies. However, d’Argens’s aim is not merely to satirize religion for its own sake in order to counter the religious fanaticism and gullibility of the masses in the name of enlightenment (though that is undoubtedly one of his goals). One of the many dangers of religion is the way it can be abused, particularly when mixed with temporal authority.

The characters in the *Lettres juives* advocate for a strict separation between ecclesiastic authority and politics. Early on, Aaron describes the dangers posed by any kind of factionalism within a polity. Expressing support for an absolute monarchy, he speaks of the need for complete harmony

⁴⁰Schechter, *Obstinate Hebrews*, 43.

between the sovereign and his people.⁴¹ He observes that “the internal problems of state are caused not by the nobles and elites, nor the troops, nor the people,” but rather “by the monks and ecclesiastical authorities” (L 5, 199). Aaron comes to view religion largely as a tool to manipulate the credulous masses by power-hungry men of selfish ambition. After describing the folly and internecine squabbling between the Jansenists and Molinists in France, he laments that every country has its own “Jansenists and Molinists” wreaking havoc. “England has its Anglicans and papists, Spain its priests and monks, Italy its ecclesiastics, and Turkey its dervishes. And they all use religion in the service of their own ends, shamefully abusing the sacred name of the divine to fool the gullible people and to authorize acting in total contradiction with natural law.”⁴²

Conspicuously missing from the list here is the Jewish religion. One might be tempted to view this as evidence of d’Argens’s philosemitism,⁴³ but the omission likely is not due to a wish on Aaron’s (or d’Argens’s) part to excuse the outlandish or fantastical character of Judaism. All three Jews serve at various moments as a conduit for classic anti-Jewish slurs and aspersions. We would have expected Aaron to take another swipe at the credulity of fanatical Jews, along with the Christians and Muslims. He elsewhere discusses the infamous false messiah Sabbatai Zevi, who was given the option to convert to Islam or die when his following became large enough to threaten the authority of the Ottoman khalif. Sabbatai Zevi chose conversion to Islam. Sabbateanism, however, never posed a threat to the internal peace and order of a Christian state. To d’Argens’s Christian audience, while it would have made perfect sense for a politician or monk to gain power by persecuting Jews *in the name of Christianity*, it would have been difficult to imagine a popular leader agitating for power by persecuting non-Jews *in the name of Judaism*. Judaism thus is the outlier religion that is presented as *not* making competing demands for temporal sovereign authority within the state. Importantly, d’Argens’s Jews are of the “purified” kind that Aaron claimed to have found in Paris in his first letters to Isaac. The implication here is that not all kinds of religion are bound to cause factionalism and corruption

⁴¹The nature of sovereignty and d’Argens’s defense of absolute sovereignty located with a benign monarch (very much echoing Bodin) is another fascinating aspect of the *Lettres* and deserves a longer treatment of its own, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁴²“Tous les pays ont l’équivalent des molinistes et des jansénistes. Il y a en Angleterre des Anglicans et des papistes, en Espagne des prêtres et des moines, en Italie des ecclésiastiques, et en Turquie des dervis. Tous ces gens-là font servir la religion à leurs fins et n’abusent que trop indignement du nom sacré de la Divinité pour tromper le peuple crédule et pour autoriser les choses les plus contraires à la loi naturelle” (L 199, 1559; translation not entirely literal, but nonetheless faithful, I believe).

⁴³See Israel’s discussion of d’Argens in *Radical Enlightenment*.

in politics, merely the irrational kinds that promote unnatural ideas and compete with the sovereign for power.

Interestingly, despite evincing a profound distrust of factionalism within a polity, d'Argens never goes so far as to propose a civil religion. Unlike Machiavelli or Hobbes who imply that a sovereign ought to be the ultimate authority in matters of both state and religion, d'Argens endorses a more Lockean cleavage between church and state. Notably, though, d'Argens goes further than Locke in his condemnation of papal authority while also envisioning a time when the papist quest for political authority will lead to its own ultimate undoing. Both Aaron and Isaac discuss the viability of Christianity in light of prevailing factionalism and popular attraction to the next new fashionable idea (e.g., L 3, 187–88; L 112, 911–12; L 197, 1544–45). Speaking through the enlightened rabbi-cum-Karaite Isaac, d'Argens insists that it is not Christianity in general that may decline, but Catholicism specifically. Isaac predicts that the competition for power between Rome and the Catholic sovereigns across Europe is, ultimately, unsustainable (L 114). As the people become more enlightened, the idea of papal infallibility will appear ever more absurd. The power of excommunication that popes claim over other temporal sovereigns will no longer be admitted. Finally, Isaac muses about the possibility of outright hostility emerging between France and Rome (L 114, 924). d'Argens is likely engaging in some wishful fantasizing here, but we can note his accurate diagnosis of the growing irreconcilability of competing claims to ultimate sovereignty in the modern era. As Aaron observes, “as soon as there are two factions within the state, it is impossible for a king to satisfy them both equally. The unsatisfied can easily justify their revolts as necessary to prevent the violation of the law” (by implication, the “higher law” of God) (L 5, 201). Once again, speaking through the “Jewish” voice is useful here, not only to lend an element of plausible deniability for d'Argens's more outlandish anticlerical statements, but also for the implicit endorsement of a different relationship between religion and sovereignty.

In the end, d'Argens's strident indictment of religion and religious factionalism retains an air of deist “faith” in the inevitable weakening of religious dogmas and the *ecclésiastiques*. Noting how the relative freedom of expression available to people in England led to a proliferation of competing theological treatises, Aaron imagines the end results of this ever growing theological cacophony: “if these pointless disputes do not cease, especially among the Christians, in the end, owing to divisiveness and lack of communion, each individual will have his own unique faith” (L 163, 1274). Too much competition for theological authority will eventually lead to everyone becoming their own ultimate theological authority. This is, of course, an ideal outcome for d'Argens and his fellow radical travelers in the “republic of letters” of the anticlerical Enlightenment. D'Argens's ideas in the *Lettres juives* are not, for the most part, uniquely radical, but he was able to “sell” some of the central controversial ideas of the radical Enlightenment—the possibility of

man's ultimate perfectibility and the notion of a separation of temporal politics from ecclesiastical authority—by clothing them in the familiar Christian framework of figural Judaism.

Conclusion

This article has not addressed the question of whether d'Argens was himself particularly philo- or antisemitic.⁴⁴ That discussion, although important, can lead one to miss some of the content of d'Argens's thought itself and, further, misses the significance of the *Lettres* as bridging Christian anti-Judaism and modern ways of thinking about big ideas using the representational vocabulary provided by figural Judaism. We can trace the various developments and uses of Jews and Judaism within modern Western thought to the present day.⁴⁵ During the Enlightenment, the Christian figure of the Jew that had been so crucial for Christian theology was refigured into a conceptual tool for generating, exploring, and communicating ascendant philosophical ideas that could challenge traditional Christian dogmas. D'Argens is among our earliest examples of this transition in action and perhaps at its most transparent. Within a century, discussions of figural Jews would shift once again, but unlike later authors who would invoke figural Judaism in order to argue either for or against actual Jewish emancipation, d'Argens's Jews are themselves the site of creative philosophical exploration and an effective means of communicating subversive ideas to a Christian audience.

The wise rabbi-cum-Karaite Isaac reminds us that “to be less well-known than another in this world is not to be any less respectable” (L 200, 1566). The *Lettres juives* is less well-known today, but no less respectable for it. D'Argens's contribution as an innovative popularizer of ideas who transformed Christianity's figural Judaism into a versatile conceptual tool for modern philosophizing is significant. Even though discussions of “Jews” and “Judaism” would soon take on a more structured form in the Jewish Question by the close of the eighteenth century, d'Argens's use of rhetorical Jews demonstrates that, though undoubtedly problematic in its potential

⁴⁴For a review of some of the efforts to move beyond this dichotomy, see Adam Sutcliffe and Johnathan Karp, introduction to *Philosemitism in History*, esp. 4–6.

⁴⁵Post-World War II examples include Jean Paul Sartre's returning to the “Jewish Question” throughout his lifetime, most famously, but not at all limited to, his *Anti-Semite and the Jew* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995); Arendt's notion of “pariah Judaism,” in *The Jew as Pariah* (New York: Grove, 1978); Isaac Deutcher's *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays* (London: Merlin, 1981); and Derrida's *judéités* (see esp. his introductory remarks in Joseph D. Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly, *Judéités* [Paris: Galilée, 2003]). See Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew*, on progressive uses of figural Judaism by Derrida and Levinas.

misrecognition and impact on Jews “in the real world,” thinking via Judaism or “as a Jew” has had a long and complex impact on political thought beyond the still-salient question of antisemitism. D’Argens’s framework of the rhetorical Jew that would go on to become so influential in modern thought and history merits both our cautious skepticism and closer attention.