Eva Johanna Holmberg. *Jews in the Early Modern English Imagination: A Scattered Nation.*
Transculturalisms, 1400–1700. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011. vii + 180 pp. $114.95. ISBN: 978–1–4094–1191–8.

Since the publication of James Shapiro's seminal study, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, in 1996, a small stream of scholarship has appeared, and with each publication, we have gained a clearer picture of the place of Jews in our collective cultural history. With her new book, *Jews in the Early Modern English Imagination*, Eva Johanna Holmberg provides a much-needed addition to this archive. Primarily a survey of travel accounts from English writers, Holmberg's study is organized topically into three substantive chapters detailing first the location of the Jews; second, their religious practices; and finally, their appearance. This archival material is prefaced by a brief methodological chapter where Holmberg parses her study's title.

Holmberg's work should be valued for the careful and detailed presentation she gives to her primary sources. Here under one cover, the interested scholar can now easily access hundreds of key passages recording firsthand accounts by English travelers detailing their impressions and encounters with Jews.

Holmberg's framing of these primary sources should prod serious reflection among readers. In particular, three aspects of her methodology deserve careful consideration. First, Holmberg advocates entertaining the idea that these documents should "not be seen only as a by-product of conscious production of Englishness, but as also motivated by an interest in the Jews as a people, and growing contacts with Jews and English men and women" (18). Here it seems clear that Holmberg wishes to intervene in order to counterbalance the now-pronounced inclination among literary historians versed in theory to read these primary texts of foreign Jews as snapshots of an important Other against which English identity is to be constructed. Perhaps Holmberg's preferred perspective could be called a kind of strategic sympathy that seeks to recover the notion that there is good reason to assume that these accounts were penned by normal human beings who were motivated by a benign, conscious curiosity to connect with other normal human beings who just happened to be Jews.

Although this belief seems most important to Holmberg, she does preface her archival work with a brief theoretical chapter in which she argues that her work should be seen as an example of mapping the collective "English imaginary" (6). This twist is the second point about her methodology that I wish to highlight. Specifically, Holmberg argues that we need to approach the idea of the imagination as "early modern people [would have when they] responded to impulses from the surrounding world" (6). Here Holmberg suggests that the idea of a cultural imaginary is best used contextually, that is, with the sensitivity we have gained from the rise of the new historicism in cultural criticism.

There is, however, a tension between these two imperatives (and this brings us to the last of my three observations). On one hand, we have the desire to read the accounts as unique individual efforts to understand foreign Jews. Thus about her writers, Holmberg concludes, these individuals came away thinking that "There were Jews who were kind to them, who saved their lives, who made them laugh and who made such a strong impression on their minds that they decided to write these impressions down" (152). Here we see evidence of Holmberg's strong desire to present her primary sources as the particular traces of unique individuals. Yet on the other hand, Holmberg has taken these individual accounts and divided them up and parceled out snippets across her chapters. This organizational decision is clearly at odds with her program of strategic sympathy; yet she has done it because this arrangement supports her desire to present the work as a generic map of the English imaginary. The result is a book in which her readers can easily compare multiple accounts of touring the ghetto or attending a religious service in a Temple, but that reward has largely canceled out the opportunity to go back and understand the emotional relationships glimpsed in the excerpts.

With luck, this tension may yet serve as a productive starting point for additional work. Indeed, Holmberg offers a great place to start when she notes toward the end of her study that it is "evident that Samuel Purchas played a decisive role in informing Englishmen about Jewish rites and customs" (100). A few pages later, she returns to this point: "It is very likely that Purchas, who befriended or knew most of the writers discussed in this study, gave additional information and guidance to these writers, whom he later included in his own printed collections" (104). In these observations we glimpse a way to connect the abstract notion of a collective English imaginary with the equally compelling desire to interpret these accounts as impressions of unique individuals. The bridge is the recognition that certain specific individuals are able to impose their impressions into the collective imaginary so that their thinking becomes the dominant mode the collective uses in its attempts to make meaning out of experience. Holmberg did not pursue this insight in this project, perhaps because it implies that certain imaginations are more powerful than others, but that disturbing truth flashes forth nonetheless, waiting to be tackled by others. In the meantime, Holmberg's work should be greeted as a most welcome addition to this lively conversation about Jews in early modern history.

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