

Barbara E. Mann, *The Object of Jewish Literature: A Material History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), pp. 280.

by *Martina Mampieri*

Barbara Mann’s book, *The Object of Jewish Literature: A Material History*—finalist for the 2023 Jordan Schnitzer Book Award, sponsored by the Association for Jewish Studies—offers an insightful and pioneering investigation into the materiality of Jewish secular literature and literary culture in the twentieth century with glimpses on contemporary art. In this instructive and creative contribution, Mann employs a comparative and interdisciplinary methodology that intertwines literary analysis, cultural history, and the examination of material features into a cohesive dialogue. This approach is meant to answer a fundamental question (which emerges more clearly at the end of the volume): “what does materiality even mean in a post-book era, when the digital domain threatens to supplant our most mundane and tangible experiences—the brittle page, the crumbling spine?” (p. 210).

Mann’s fascination for early twentieth-century journals and ephemeral materials beyond sacred texts guides her (and through her, us) on an exploration of artifacts that may not be visually stunning or luxurious, but are undoubtedly captivating. Recent scholarship on material culture and provenance research vividly illustrates that examining a book as a physical object can reveal narratives specific to that particular specimen. Drawing inspiration from these studies and acknowledging the uniqueness of each item, Mann introduces an additional level of analysis. She contemplates the relationship between the text, language, layout, format, design, and material choice, and how these elements shape the readership experience and interpretation of the content.

The book consists of six well-reasoned chapters that explore specific genres through a thorough presentation of some representative texts. After an introduction explaining the origins of this work and the theoretical framework on which it grounds (see, for example, the concepts of “modernism” and “material affordances”), the first chapter is dedicated to Jewish imagism and the interplay between the word and image in Hebrew and Yiddish poetry books by a group of poets working in Hebrew and European contexts as well as in New York and

Palestine. As Mann concludes at the end of this chapter, “the production of poetry is presented here as a physical process in which the poet’s body (hand and foot) becomes enmeshed in the body of the machine press (its “shining arms”), a demanding and exacting set of activities that is nonetheless satisfying” (p. 50). The second chapter looks at magazines and newspapers as visual artifacts and art manifestos, produced between Eastern Europe and New York. While the narrative of these pieces maintains its “Jewishness” (or more precisely, its “Yiddishkeit,” also thanks to the development of Yiddish typography), their other physical attributes deeply resonate with the influence of modernist culture, expressionism, art nouveau, constructivist abstraction, and various avant-garde movements. This embodies a theme of mobility, mirroring the magazines’ purpose to be circulated in a pocket, from one location to another, “between local and transnational contexts” (p. 84). In the following chapter, Mann delves deeper into her analysis by contemplating the tangible aspects derived from fictional objects—including the shtetl, bricolage, olive wood creations, and stuffed animals—as depicted in the works of David Bergelson, Henry Roth, and S. Y. Agnon. The third chapter might be the most challenging to comprehend and the least persuasive, given its focus shifts away from the physical attributes of the book itself to instead spotlight the items described within it. Its relevance and consistency with the remainder of the volume remain uncertain. Conversely, the fourth chapter (which Mann defines the “spine” of her study) offers an insightful examination on Holocaust memorial books (or *yizkor* books) as a “new transnational genre wherein writing itself becomes an object” (p. 112). Here, the books themselves—supported by photographs, illustrations, maps, poems, and ephemeral items—act as mediums “to commemorate the history of their towns and its destruction and to honor the memory of their murdered neighbors” (p. 118). This chapter showcases several significant examples that underline this fundamental connection. Linked to the Holocaust, it’s the reflection on graphic novels in chapter five. Graphic novels such as *Maus* by Art Spiegelmann, *The Property* by Rutu Modan, and *The Rabbi’s Cat* by Joann Sfar are presented as a compelling genre of images and texts to talk about Jewish trauma. Like graphic novels, artists’ books (chapter 6) create a novel language that enhances the book as an object while simultaneously their physical characteristics can challenge the traditional sequential format of the codex and the standard expectations of readers. While looking at premodern sacred

scrolls and the small magazines explored in chapter two, the artists' book redefines the relationship between art and the world, provoking inquiries about the fundamental nature and classification of the book as an object, as well as the environments in which they are created. Mann's contemplation on the art scene in Musrara and the politically charged act of creating literature and art "on the seam" in Jerusalem—a context that is notably pertinent and impactful—is succeeded by notes and an index that wrap up the volume.

In addition to the already emphasized content and methodological merits of the volume, significant appreciation is also due for the incorporation of a wide array of images and materials from libraries and museums, as well as for the thoughtful addition of brief introductions at the end of each chapter that pave the way for the subsequent one. The narrative is enriched by Mann's engaging writing style, which makes this book a valuable resource not only for scholars but also for general readers and artists with an interest in Jewish culture and literature.

However, the book could have gained from an alternative introduction, one that more directly addresses the transition from premodern to modern books, and from sacred to secular realms. Although sacred scrolls and the codex format are occasionally referenced, a concise historical overview of premodern books—from the development of Jewish printing through the emancipation and secularization of European Jewry, the political turmoil in Eastern Europe and Palestine, and the significant Jewish migration to the United States—could have offered readers a more nuanced understanding of the rise of secular genres during the interwar and postwar periods. Opting for a different title (such as *The Object of Modern Jewish Secular Literature*) might have also aided readers in more easily discerning the subject matter of the volume.

Overall, Mann's work is a groundbreaking and meticulously researched book. It offers a fresh perspective on modern Jewish secular literature, challenging readers to consider the significance of the physical form in shaping literary meaning and cultural values. This volume significantly enhances our comprehension of the intricate interplay between text and materiality within the Jewish literary tradition, highlighting its pivotal importance in the development of literary genres that help narrate the past, interpret the present, and envision the future.

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