Tal Ilan, *Mine and Yours are Hers: Retrieving Women's History from Rabbinic Literature*, Leiden/ New York/ Köln: Brill, 1997. xiii +346 pp. ISBN 90 04 10860 2.

Mine And Yours Are Hers is the second book in Tal Ilan's trilogy on women in Second Temple and rabbinic literature. Its main concern is the nature of rabbinic texts as a historical source — a source from which we can learn about the history of Jewish women in particular. Ilan admits that these texts are highly problematic for her initial goal (retrieving women's history from rabbinic literature): not only are they patriarchal documents, they are also, often enough, literary rather than historical in character. Ilan argues that it is nevertheless possible to extract historical truths from these texts by applying what might be termed 'lie detector' methods. In fact, Ilan's methodological discussion is the core of the book, as the author states in her introduction: 'This book suggests methodological principles, which when applied to women mentioned (and not mentioned) in rabbinic literature, reveal historical data' (p. 36). The methodological principles seek to incorporate philological-historical tools on the one hand and literary analysis 'which reveals legendary, folklorist and other elements of fiction found in them' (ibid.), on the other.

The book is structured around the different methods it introduces. The first part addresses the philological issue of establishing a reliable text with which to work. Here, from the perspective of women's studies, Ilan argues that traditions which favored women were consciously or otherwise censored. Thus, a governing principle in the philological reconstruction of the text includes the search for the lost feminine perspective, which is believed by Ilan very often to lie at the heart of the original version. The second part of the book discusses the importance of external testimonies (e.g. archaeological, pseudepigraphic and Greek literature) for verifying rabbinic material, while distinguishing them from the phenomenon of literary parallels; in this part Ilan also calls for a between-the-lines reading of halakhic (legal) discourse. The third part focuses on female language (in halakhic and aggadic/narrative texts) and the importance of names as historical indicators. The methodological axes of the book are complemented by an impressive variety of examples which render the book a real treasure-trove of fascinating texts.

Considering the fields with which this book associates itself (feminist criticism and historiography of rabbinic texts), and in view of the author's enthusiasm and commitment to the task she has set herself, it may be somewhat discouraging to find that the most basic premises of Ilan's work are highly questionable.

In the preface, Ilan quotes Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza who had labeled Ilan's work 'positivist history' (xi): indeed, Ilan acknowledges that she wants to find out about 'real women and things they really did' (38). This yearning brings her to the promised land, where the character of the Matrona who engages in dialogue with the sage is based on a historical Palestinian Jewish woman in search of education — a specific figure of that (personal) name (237-262); where the maid of Rabbi Yishmael who comments on her master's clean sheets (i.e. not soiled by semen) is a real person (263); where the wife of Rabbi Akiva (probably not named 'Rachel', probably not of upper-class descent) (183) really advises him to study and thus historically plays a key role in his development (274). In this reconstructed landscape the 'real' Martha

bat Boethus might have been 'associated with the Pharisees who preserved the (= positive) tradition about her' (97); the Babylonian Yalta was definitely not the wife of Rav Nahman (123) but an opinionated, independent, woman: 'she was famous enough to become a paradigm for women who enjoyed special privileges' (128)!

Before turning to the plausibility of these biographical reconstructions one may ask how, and whether, they are significant. To be sure, if in fact it were possible to infer that there were, for example, specific independent women (Beruria, Yalta) whose views were recounted in rabbinic texts, we could 'retrieve women's history' in a very basic sense: this would re-cast the historical play by placing the otherwise (i.e. in previous studies of rabbinics) supporting actresses at the front of the stage, thereby voicing a feminine counter-history. It is easy to see the temptation of positivist historiography in general and of 'feminist' positivist historiography in particular: concrete, active, women emerge from an abstract text, filling the void with a vivid reality. Unfortunately, as Elizabeth Clark noted, 'the leap from "representation" to the extratextual world crosses a wide and ugly ditch'.[1]

Ilan contends that she has found the methods with which that ditch can be crossed, methods which can distinguish between 'historical' and 'literary' texts, or between historical and literal components in a single textual unit. Thus, for instance, the appearance of a female character in a text the literary plot of which does not specifically require that it be a woman (it could equally have employed a male protagonist) indicates that that woman is a real historical figure (239). Ilan's puzzling statement rests on her previous, more general, assertion that 'Women are always anomalous in ancient texts, and their mere presence has to be sufficiently explained' (54). Now, one may ask (suspending one's disbelief for the time being), according to which literary criteria will the irreplaceability of the feminine figure be determined? The following example which is analyzed by Ilan (one of many to be found in the book) may illustrate the problematic literary premiss on which her historical reconstruction rests:

> Matrona asked Rabbi Yose: Is it possible that Joseph, seventeen years of age, standing in all his heat, could do this thing (i.e. resist the advances of Potiphar's wife)? Thereupon, he brought before her the Book of Genesis and began reading to her the stories of Reuben and Judah. He said to her: If Scripture did not cover up in the case of those, who were adults, and in their father's domain, how much more in the case of Joseph, who was young and on his own (Genesis Rabbah 87:6, Ilan's translation, 257).

Previous scholarship has maintained that (the) 'matrona' in the large corpus of matrona/sages debates is a literary topos, a Gentile woman who stands for a range of anti-Jewish groups/views. Tal Ilan's thesis, in her own words, is 'revolutionary' (241): the matrona, at least in some of the stories, is a woman named 'Matrona', and she was not a Gentile arguing with the Jew, but a Jewish woman in search of some real answers. That she was a Jewish woman we may infer from the popularity the name 'Matrona' had amongst Jewish women at that time; some of her questions too, according to Ilan, were of no specific interest to Gentiles. Nor were they of specific

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1 E.E. Clark, 'Holy Women, Holy Words: Early Christian Women, Social History, and the Linguistic Turn', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 6(3), 1998, 430.

interest for women. As mentioned before, this last point is decisive, according to the author's method, insofar as it proves that there was no 'literary' need for a female character, hence her historicity is proved.

Yet, in the example quoted above the female figure is not necessarily superfluous to the meaning of the anecdote: the erotic tension between the matrona and the sage could well be a vital sub-textual component of this story in which the archetypal foreign/female seducer, Potiphar's wife, is re-evoked.[2] Rabbi Yose's answer shifts the attention from the matrona's teasing words by referring to other sexual misconducts that Scripture openly relates (notice that these have to do with 'internal' domestic affairs rather than cross-cultural ones.)[3] Ilan concludes that '[u]nless we assume that women, more than men, would be interested in adultery, this question (= the matrona's) is also of no particular interest to women' (258).

This statement, to my mind, not only implies a misguided literary understanding,[4] it also conveys a limited (mis)reading of rabbinic texts, one which ignores their semiotics: maybe there was a Jewish woman named 'Matrona' who frequented a Palestinian academy (and then again, maybe not). That, however, does not seem to me to be the main issue, just as the question of how many children she had is irrelevant, or at least not very interesting.[5] Even if Matrona existed (and how we wish she did!), by the time she enters rabbinic texts she has not only lost all personal features, she has also lost her particularity: she becomes part of the semiotic system which the rabbis engendered (not implying necessarily that they had complete control over it). In other words: rabbinic texts are cultural productions in which events, characters, places etc. — presumed to have 'realistic', referential qualities — are expressed

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2 On the affair of Joseph and Potiphar's wife as an arena in which cultural/religious identities are negotiated in rabbinic literature see J. Levinson, 'An-Other Woman: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife. Staging the Body Politic', *The Jewish Quarterly Review* LXXXVII, Nos. 3-4 (1997), pp. 269-301.

3 In this context, as well, Ilan's suggestion that the matrona is assumed to be Jewish is interesting: her representational role would be modified, depending on her 'external'/'internal' position. On projecting 'other' views on foreign figures see C. E. Hays, 'Displaced Self-Perception: The Development of *Minim* and Romans in B. *Sanhedrin* 90b-91a', in *Religious and Ethnic Communities in later Roman Palestine* (ed. H. Lapin), Bethesda, 1998, p. 274.

4 It is not clear to me what exactly are the literary methods which she employs; similarly, when it comes to 'folkloristic' methods, her theoretical premises are vague. See, for instance, her discussion of 'motifs' ('literary', 'folk'): Ilan admits that the 'definition of a literary motif is rather complex' (148); indeed, it seems that the numerous examples she brings for motifs do not presume coherent criteria. On the *problématique* of motifs in historical and comparative studies see D. Ben Amos, 'The Concept of Motif in Folklore', in *Folklore Studies in the Twentieth Century* (ed. V. J. Newall), Suffolk, 1980, pp. 17-36; idem, 'Are There Any Motifs in Folklore?' in *Thematics Reconsidered — Essays in Honor of H. S. Daemmrich* (ed. F. Trommler), Amsterdam and Atlanta, 1995, pp. 71-85.

5 Alluding, of course, to the famous article by L. C. Knights, 'How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?' in his *Explorations: Essays in Criticism*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1946; see Ilan's speculation on the biography of the historical 'Matrona' in which she discusses her (absent) husband, etc. (261).

within a framework of representational convention.[6] Hence, it is problematic to think in terms of a 'degree zero' moment, in which 'reality' (pre-cultural, non-ideological) is reflected in the text. On the other hand, these hypothetically lost moments of 'pure' history are also not necessarily the most interesting from a historiographical/cultural perspective: proving that the matrona was a specific woman in Palestine — which seems doubtful — would tell us less about Jewish history — including women's history — in late antiquity than if she were regarded in the framework of the cultural — conventionalized — representation of women in rabbinic texts.

In rabbinic discourse women are often charged with a disruptive, liminal quality, not uncommonly associated with their sexual and erotic powers. Ilan correctly points out that 'most studies of sexuality [...] involve discussion of women, because most sex is performed with women. However, this does not make it an integral part of women studies' (30, n. 111). In other words, the automatic association of sexuality and women in (reading) rabbinic texts might result in reproducing the old patriarchal bias. However, ignoring this association altogether means not only overlooking pivotal cultural dynamics which are reflected and constructed in rabbinic discursive practices, it also might culminate — as in this case — in mixing up 'reality' and discourse. The Eros which is embedded in the matrona's character — in the text cited above — is intricately woven with that of Potiphar's wife. As midrashic traditions amply show, a double pull of attraction and repulsion is at play in that reconstructed biblical scene,[7] where social borders are negotiated. Isolating the matrona from that intertext, when it is explicitly stated in the tale, fails to account for the complexity of the specific text and ignores the semiotic system in which the story operates. This very same system employs the matrona figure in a different genre, namely parables:[8] there she is engaged in a passionate relationship with the trouble-making king. The parabolic symbolic structure where theological questions regarding Israel and God are raised (and not entirely answered)[9] and in which the matrona figure plays a prominent role can thus serve as an additional intertext to the matrona/sage corpus. Suggesting a semiotic intertextual frame of reference does not constitute hermeneutics that silences the suppressed voice of a specific, historical woman in rabbinic texts, since that voice — if it ever existed — was lost prior to its entering the hegemonic discourse. And since rabbinic literature presents the rabbinic *imaginaire* it

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6 See, for instance, Hayden White: 'Viewed in a purely formal way, a historical narrative is not only a *reproduction* of the events reported in it, but also a complex of *symbols* which gives us directions for finding an *icon* of structure of those events in our literary tradition' (*Tropics of Discourse — Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore and London, 1978, p. 88).

7 See Levinson, 'An-Other woman' (and earlier works cited there).

8 On the king/matrona parables in *Lamentations Rabbah*, see, for instance, D. Stern, *Parables in Midrash — Narrative Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature*, Cambridge and London, 1991; on the matrona in 'tales of the sages' see, for instance, bQiddushin, 39b-40a.

9 On this issue see Y. Fraenkel, *The Ways of the Aggadah and the Midrash*, Givatayim, 1991, pp. 332-7 (in Hebrew); compare Stern (above n. 8, pp. 40-2).

is important — from a feminist historiographical point of view — to see what place women occupied in their fantasy.[10]

Tal Ilan's book raises issues which relate to the cutting edge of the broad field of rabbinic studies: what is the nature of the texts? how are we to understand their referentiality? is it possible to account for non-hegemonic views (or even 'voices') within them? More specifically, the book addresses itself to the issue of historiography and women's studies of these texts. However, most of the (explicit) questions which are raised in Ilan's study are similar to the ones long abandoned by the 'general' (patriarchal, non-feminist) historiography of rabbinics. Recently, Shaye Cohen remarked that the efforts of previous scholarship to identify the character of Antoninus in the rabbinic corpus with an actual historical figure are 'almost humorous';[11] one might wonder why the search for a 'real' Matrona, or Yalta, or Rabbi Akiva's wife, or Martha bat Boethus, should be any different.

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Gian Pietro Brogiolo, Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Idea and Ideal of the Town between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Leiden: Brill, 1999. Pp. xvi, 265. $92.00. ISBN 90 04 0901 3.

Bishop Isidore of Seville was a lucky man. He knew the difference between *urbs* and *civitas*: *urbs ipsa moenia sunt, civitas autem non saxa, sed habitatores vocantur* (*Etym.* 15.2.1). Modern scholarship is less confident about its ability to find an une-

10 Compare, for instance, her discussion on the maidservant of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch (pp. 97-107): when not measured over against (imagined) measures of reality, the semiotic potential of the different feminine characters might unfold. Ilan, however, comments that in the Babylonian Talmud — in contrast to the Palestinian tradition — 'Rabbi's maidservant was blown up into an outstanding example of wisdom and loyalty ...' (106): only if a realistic core, or in this case a reasonable measure of fantasy, is assumed can a statement like this be made. Moreover, that Palestinian tradition (99) is a complex narrative which dramatizes the anxiety of hegemonic (rabbinic) discourse: the rabbis and their discontents are fleshed out through the figure of the maid — a feminine 'other' within. Ilan, in her reading, reduces the meaning of the story to one function: demonstrating Rabbi's greatness. There is no apparent rationale for her reductive literary analysis: in the case of Rabbi's maid it seems that even Ilan does not declare her a specific historical figure. Here we are left then in the realm of literary creations (with historical functions, to be sure, e.g. praising Rabbi). Yet there is no acknowledgment of the volatile quality of the character — a well-known literary figure in Roman literature (See, recently, W. Fitzgerald, *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination*, Cambridge, 2000, and the earlier works cited there.). Again, as in the case of the matrona, despite the wealth of texts which suggest otherwise, the erotic potential of the maid, and the cultural implications of such a discursive figure, are not discussed (see, for instance, the narratives on pp. 98, 104). At this point it seems that the pleasure of the text is lost altogether.

11 S.J.D. Cohen, 'The Conversion of Antoninus,' *The Talmud Yerushalmi and Greco-Roman Culture* (ed. P. Schäfer), Tübingen, 1998, p. 141.