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Imitation and Deception

The 'Jewish Mimicry' and the Anti-Semitic Discourse
in the 19th and 20th century

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English Summary

The term »Jewish mimicry« was coined at the beginning of the 20th century, but is less known than other anti-Semitic stereotypes, for example those concerning the »Jewish body«. During the 19th century biologists created the term to describe the newly found capability of some harmless insects to mimic the appearance and other attributes of poisonous insects. This capacity was considered to be a means of protection developed in the course of evolution and – in the context of the rise of social Darwinism – was soon applied to human society. Shortly thereafter the term »mimicry« also appeared as part of the defamatory vocabulary of the anti-Semites. However, the idea behind the term arose much earlier than the term itself.

During the time of the Enlightenment Jews were prompted to adapt themselves to gentile society, to assimilate. But soon enough the assimilated Jews were blamed for concealing their real identity. For Jews, this resulted in an unavoidable double bind. »Jewish mimicry« and the ideas associated with it can be seen as a central element of modern anti-Semitic discourse, since the invisible superiority constructed by it often forms the core of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. The attribution of a particular mimetic capacity to Jews also points to the fact that, since the desegregation of the ghetto, Jewish minorities in modernity have often been associated with ambivalence, boundary-crossing, and processes of mixing that lead to a blurring of clear distinctions and essentialist categories of identity. The assumption of a special Jewish talent for imitation and deception, however, often results in paradoxes; the stereotype of »Jewish mimicry«, after all, states on the one hand that Jews adapt themselves beyond recognition to their surrounding society, yet remain recognizably different. As in many cases, the spread of this stereotype forced not least the stereotyped to confront the mimetic qualities attributed to them. In Zionist discussions, for example, »assimilation«

was repeatedly seen as a form of harmful and ultimately also useless, adaptation to the ›predator‹. The stereotype was also the basis for the widespread assumption that Jews had special acting abilities. Since the performance of actors in the 19th century was increasingly regarded as an artistic achievement in its own right, such talent could also well be interpreted as creativity, even genius.

This volume attempts to trace the processing of this stereotype in the texts of diverse German-language authors, both of Jewish and non-Jewish background, including Achim von Arnim's speech *Ueber die Kennzeichen des Judenthums* (*About the Characteristics of Judaism*), Oskar Panizza's story *Der operirte Jud'* (*The Operated Jew*), Franz Kafka's animal story *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie* (*A Report to an Academy*), Karl Emil Franzos' novel *Der Pojaz* (*The Clown of Barnow*) and Thomas Mann's novella *Wälsungenblut* (*The Blood of the Walsungs*). It shows in what way the paradoxical implications of ›Jewish mimicry‹ are reflected in these texts: Some of these texts are driven by the desire for unambiguity and neat clarification of the boundaries between what is Jewish and what is German. This desire for clear distinctions and homogeneity, however, is often countered by a tendency towards textual and linguistic blending, which brings the texts closer to the aesthetic category of the grotesque. In other texts the transgressive qualities attributed to mimicry are harnessed to subvert dichotomous and fixed categories in terms of a counter-strategy.

The examination of the heterogeneous text corpus makes the close interweaving of the stereotype with various contemporary discourses comprehensible: Not only social problems, but also aesthetic questions are closely intertwined with the contemporary so-called ›Jewish question‹. For example, works of art created by assimilated Jews were often defamed as mere imitations, or even caricatures, of works of art by artists of German origin. The ideals of sincerity and authenticity established in bourgeois society since the Enlightenment, the cult of genius and the associated concepts of originality and essentialist notions of identity lead to the accusation of imitation and deception having a particularly severe effect. By relegating this to the Jews, it was possible to separate the aspects of imitation and deception that are always connected with the production of art and the establishing of social identities from the ideal of a homogeneous, creatively autonomous and authentic German identity and art.