

Conversion and Convergence: Gendering Anglo-Jewishness in the Nineteenth Century

The Jewess in Nineteenth-Century British Literary Culture. Nadia Valman. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 270 pp.

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<1> Over a few weeks in 1879 *The Jewish Chronicle* printed a series of letters under the rubric, “Jewish Women and ‘Women’s Rights.’” In response to a correspondent who insists that “women have their sphere,” another writer remarks wryly, “But I doubt if even the great ‘maiden-aunt’ would be sufficient to console many a restless, ambitious woman for the dreary performance of work for which she is quite unsuited, for the quenching of personal hopes for the development of her own intellect.”(1) Amy Levy wrote these words when she was a seventeen-year old student at Brighton High School for Girls. A decade later in *Reuben Sachs* (1889), her novel about middle-class Jews in London, Levy delivers a critique of a parochial and patriarchal Anglo-Jewry, a vision informed by the liberal feminist position evident even when she was in high school. Providing a robust dissection of gender and Jewishness in literature before and including Levy’s novel, Nadia Valman’s eloquent and erudite *The Jewess in Nineteenth-Century British Literary Culture* examines a range of British writers who featured the Jewess in their narratives. With *Reuben Sachs*, which falls near the end of the century’s trajectory, Valman reorients Levy’s deployment of contemporary racialist discourse in her portrayal of “sallow” Jewesses oppressed by the vulgar materialism of their co-religionists. For Valman, Levy’s proto-modernist depiction “updates in feminist terms the paradigm popularised by earlier nineteenth-century Evangelical novels” (191). It is precisely this surprising juxtaposition that makes Valman’s book so stimulating.

<2> *The Jewess* explores with historical precision and literary acuity the ubiquitous persistence of the Christian conversion narrative that undergirds representations of the Jewess from Walter Scott to Amy Levy. In this sense, Valman continues scholarly conversations launched by Michael Ragussis’ *Figures of Conversion: ‘The Jewish Question’ and English National Identity* (1995) and Reina Lewis’ *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (1996) through a convergence of the conversion paradigm and gender analysis. As Valman points out, “The culture of conversion had a distinctly female accent” (53). Valman exploits a certain symbolic flexibility around the figure of the Jewess who had been deployed for both conservative measures – as a model of piety under duress in Evangelical Christian narratives – and liberal gestures – as the victim of a sexist traditionalism in novels like *Reuben Sachs* that fall at the end of the century.

Attentive to the investments and liabilities of a liberal ideology, whether marked by a nationalist or feminist agenda, Valman foregrounds the Jewess as a landscaper's tool for the boundaries of national inclusions, as she illuminates the paradoxical uses of Jewish exceptionalism and liberal tolerance and progress.

<3> In this respect, Valman spotlights the complex valences of the Jewess, from the hypersexualized and racialized, sometimes to imagine female agency or to press Christian superiority, to the redemptive and oversanitized, used to promote Christian evangelical salvation. As Valman argues, figuring the Jewess offers an aperture into the vicissitudes of Englishness across the century: "If the Jew, still too modern or archaic, came to stand for the excesses of capitalism or a degenerative atavism, the Jewess equally held the potential for cultural or racial regeneration. The figuring and refiguring of English national identity in religious, political or racial terms relied on the images of Jews that were, above all, gendered" (7). Where other scholars have read Jewishness in understanding the boundaries of the modern liberal subject in English culture, Valman makes a magnificent case for gender as the leavening agent in the larger picture of nation and narration that her study pursues.

<4> For me, the most rewarding aspects of this book are the surprising links uncovered or prompted. For instance, Valman knits together her nuanced cultural history with an impressive range of canonical, more recently renewed, and underexamined novels, plays, and poetry. Although *The Jewess* largely follows a chronological route, the early chapter on the liberal nation ties *Ivanhoe* (1819) to an English staging of the German melodrama, *Leah, or the Forsaken* (1862), and to Anthony Trollope's novel *Nina Balatka* (1867) as Valman shows how the Jewess accentuates both narrative and national exclusions. Valman usefully concludes that although the trope of the beautiful, virtuous Jewess might promote sympathetic inclusion, her devotion to her faith and race poses a challenge to the logic of British tolerance, especially since such tolerance seems contingent on conversion or emigration, or reverts to an emphasis on Jewish prejudices rather than prejudices against Jews.

<5> Christian narratives about the Jewess as the subject of redemptive conversion serve as a template from which other narratives borrow and refashion. In the third chapter, Valman correlates Evangelical women's writing with both the imperial mission aimed at slaves and Indians and the mission to Jewish women, as evinced in documents circulated by the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews, especially with gender distinction as "the crucial ground on which middle-class identities were constructed" (56). If gender ideology rendered women adept at imitating Christ's martyrdom and concomitant redemptive agency, the Jewess, in these narratives, figured as the perfect model for this sacrificial position as the victim of domestic suffering under the tyranny of Jewish patriarchy. This chapter devoted to evangelical women writers Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, Annie Webb, Elizabeth Rigby, Amelia Bristow and Madame Brendlah also explores diverse genres, from conversion society pamphlets and convert autobiographies to Webb's historical novel *Naomi; or, the Last Days of Jerusalem* (1841) and Elizabeth Rigby's romance fiction, *The Jewess: A Tale from the Shores of the Baltic* (1843).

<6> Because of my own lingering curiosity about Elizabeth Rigby, later known as Lady Eastlake and the author of the scathing 1848 review of *Jane Eyre* that accused the heroine and her creator of inciting Chartism at home in what Rigby claimed was “pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition,” I found especially fascinating Valman’s treatment of Rigby’s evangelical romance, especially the tension between conventional authority and a “feminist subtext” in this novel, an implicit strain in other evangelical writing. The feminist motif emerges through the affiliation between the Jewess and the Anglo-Christian woman who rescues Rose first from anti-Jewish persecution and then from Jewish oppression through her husband. As Valman stresses that Rose’s ultimate identification is with the Christian Englishwoman and not the Jewish husband, this interest in a sisterhood bond traversing religious and cultural divides, as in the biblical story of Naomi and Ruth, echoes across other evangelical narratives in this study. Yet what happens to this bond at the end of the century in novels like *Reuben Sachs* or Julia Frankau’s *Dr. Phillips* (1887), where any salutary, redemptive identification between women vanishes altogether?

<7> This motif of the Jewess’ domestic misery and disempowerment as a muted critique on behalf of all married women surfaces sharply in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876), and Valman offers this reading of Daniel’s mother, embittered as a Jewish daughter who renders her diminishment as a Jewess through the tropes of the Inquisition’s methods of torture. While this feminist critique through Leonora’s story is familiar, and one that implicitly links her to the Christian Englishwoman Gwendolen who suffers mightily under her husband’s imperious reign, what is new about Valman’s reading is her observation that Eliot’s novel also draws on the gendered paradigms of the Evangelical conversion narratives decades earlier. From here, Valman investigates other ways in which messianic Christian narratives of redemption structure the novel: “These elements of the conversion genre, which emphasise the suffering and submission of the Jewess – by which she is ennobled and made worthy of redemption – are linked ... to the novel’s conceptualising of Jewish history and crucial to its broader political vision” (153). Despite Eliot’s endorsement of Judaism as the model of a religion of the heart and humanity, the novel, Valman persuasively argues, remains ultimately shaped by the conversion narrative as a deep structure of Victorian fiction.

<8> The previous chapter, on Anglo-Jewish fiction by Grace Aguilar and by Celia and Marion Moss, considers how these Jewish authors reshaped Christian conversion narratives in the 1830s and 1840s to assert an English and Jewish identity through the figure of female spiritual superiority that served to unite, in Valman’s intriguing alignment, Protestant and Jewish women readers. The final chapter, where Valman discusses Levy and Frankau’s “*fin-de-siècle* racial romances,” comprehends gender relations among Jewish characters as a symptom of Jewish degeneration, although in *Reuben Sachs*, the oppression of women in the anachronistic “tribal duck-pond” (*Reuben Sachs* 69) of contemporary London Jewry, is also a sign of ingrained and defensive conservatism over more modern, egalitarian attitudes and secularizing tendencies. Since there is no indication of even a remnant of the sisterhood narratives of Evangelical fiction and its Anglo-Jewish counterparts in these later novels, how might we account for this shift?

<9> An indication of the rigorous and fresh readings here is the many future directions *The Jewess* might inspire. For instance, in what ways does the intermarriage plot displace earlier conversion stories, not just in the novels of Israel Zangwill, but even in Levy and Eliot and

Trollope, working back into earlier decades of the century to find some of its roots? How does the intermarriage plot clash with the “racial hygienic narrative” where eugenics seems both to promote and to thwart hybrid unions? And how does poetry function as a minor genre in the cultural iconography of the Jewess in fictional narratives? Since Valman demonstrates an acute interest in genre and gender, I wonder whether lyrical poetry reforms some of these motifs around Jewishness, gender, and Englishness. At the same time, different narratorial strategies emerge in late-century narratives in contrast to the Evangelical designs that effectively align the Christian woman who hears the story of the Jewess’ plight with the Christianized reader. How, for instance, does Levy’s protomodernist fracturing of subject positions in *Reuben Sachs* suggest not connections, but fragmented divides that cut across gender, class, and cultural or religious differences? *The Jewess in Nineteenth-Century British Literary Culture* provides a wealth of new channels for us to trace the transformations of the Jewess and her narrative paradigms into the next century, and beyond.

Endnotes

(1)“Jewish Women and ‘Women’s Rights,’” *The Jewish Chronicle* (7 February 1879): 5; rpt. in Amy Levy, *Reuben Sachs*, ed. Susan David Bernstein (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006): 171-75.(^)