The New Woman and the Empire

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As an Anglo-Jewish, middle-class woman living in the increasingly anti-Semitic London of the 1880s, Amy Levy (1861–1889) brings the story of late-nineteenth-century British colonialism from colonies right into the middle of the London metropolis. Levy’s life and work illustrate the ruthless splitting of “the outsiders” from the self-declared privileged insiders that was taking place within the “imperial race” itself. In ways similar to (but at the same time very different from) the Anglo-Irish Grand and Egerton, Levy’s story suggests the ethereality of the category of the British “imperial race,” lending particular urgency to the question of whether any referent for this category existed at all.

At first sight, the Levies would appear a model example of a London-based, English-speaking, middle-class family that had built its affluence through its participation in the colonial project. As Linda Hunt Beckman, Levy’s biographer, has pointed out, Amy’s maternal great-grandfather had made his living trading between Cornwall and Spain, and Levy’s father built the foundations of his fortune selling clothes and other necessities to gold miners in Australia. While their various roles in British colonialism yielded a host of material and cultural benefits—after all, it was their monies and bourgeois social standing that enabled the Levies to send their daughter to Cambridge—their Jewish background made the family’s full participation in British imperial culture a highly provisional affair.
The correlation between the phenomenal post-emancipation economic ascendancy of Jews in Britain and the growing sway of Victorian racial theories ousting “the Jew” from the core of the English nation—which David Feldman and others have observed—was hardly coincidental. The increasingly influential pseudoscientific theories representing Jewry as a distinct and highly suspect race (rather than a religious or cultural minority) and as markedly different from (and inassimilable into) the “real” English, strengthened the already prevailing perception in the English community of “the Jew” as the dubious and unpatriotic Semitic Other. At this height of bitter colonial rivalries among the European empires, when Britain was preoccupied with its quest for an unambiguous and homogeneous national and racial identity, the Anglo-Jewish community easily became framed as problematic in that it appeared to resist being represented as unequivocally white and European. Being, according to Sander Gilman, “the most visible Other in late nineteenth century Europe,” Anglo-Jewry inadvertently defied the key function of nationalism—to conceal the actual differences within the national community behind a constructed image of homogeneous unity—and continued to be a source of much anxiety.

The Jewish matrilineal custom (determining who would and who would not be considered a Jew) further complicated Levy’s place within the English community since this circumstance effectively excluded her from the one extolled function reserved by the Victorian nation for its women—her motherhood of the next English generation. Thus irrespective of her family’s longstanding British roots, simply by being born an Anglo-Jewish woman, Levy would be considered a renegade even before she wrote a single page of text. If Levy did have children (which she never did, committing suicide at age twenty seven, unmarried and childless), in the eyes of many in the mainstream community she would be just “polluting” the English race with a new generation of those who had come to be considered as a “pernicious atavism,” “evolutionary relic,” as corrupt and corrupting. Not having children, however, would have been considered an offense on her part against the Jewish community. As a hyphenated woman, Levy appears to have had to negotiate between (often contradictory) pressures coming from the two cultural communities within which she located herself and which both in some ways helped construct her difficult sense of identity.

The question of Levy’s positioning in relation to British colonialism—driven as it was in the nineteenth century by the narrative of the English nation—thus appears exceedingly complicated. While the history of her
family's (however unstable) wealth implicates Levy in the British imperial project, being born Jewish would appear to have prevented her from reaping full benefits of British imperialism and placed her to some extent with the disadvantaged and colonized. With her “charming little Eastern face,” this “small dark girl, of unmistakably Jewish type,”8 did not have to leave London to gain a first-hand experience with Victorian racializing practices, or rather their one distinct form—anti-Semitism. However much her family and she herself desired to see themselves as Anglo, at the same time without rejecting their Jewish background and connections, the image of themselves that they tried to project was consistently rejected.

GENDER ISSUES IN LEVY’S POETRY

As a single, college-educated, emancipated, Anglo-Jewish woman writer with close ties to such quintessential New Woman figures as Eleanor Marx9 and Olive Schreiner, Levy (in Meri-Jane Rochelson’s words) “adds a Jewish dimension to the nineteenth-century feminist literary tradition.”10 As an author of much quite remarkable and often uncompromisingly feminist poetry, she also adds a poet’s voice to this narrative of the British fin-de-siècle women’s movement.

Because of the author’s early death, her poems were produced years before the New Woman was christened in 1894.11 But despite the date of its production, and although the term “New Woman” was used mostly in reference to fiction, in Levy’s poetry we find many themes that (along with their rendition) decidedly place it within the discourse of the New Woman movement. Many of Levy’s poems are lyrical reflections on a state of mind. But others articulate (and quite unequivocally) her rejection of the institution of marriage; they contribute to the anti–Contagious Diseases Acts arguments; and they passionately endorse women’s desire for education, a highly current topic at the fin de siècle.

Much feminist scholarship has been published on Levy’s poetry, particularly on her women-centered dramatic monologues as well as her love lyrics (usually written from either a male or a gender-ambiguous perspective and addressed to women,12 and read by many twentieth-century critics as expressive of lesbian desire). Already Elaine Showalter enthusiastically cited Levy’s “A Ballad of Religion and Marriage” as a text that eagerly envisioned a future free both of the concept of universal marriage and of religion.13 Beckman’s analysis situates Levy’s poetry within the larger nineteenth-century female poetic tradition.14 Emma Francis has analyzed
Levy’s late lyrics and found in them “a feminism which is more sophisticated than that of many of her contemporaries” in its breakdown of the very categories of gender and desire. And Cynthia Scheinberg’s ground-breaking contribution to the Levy scholarship lies in her serious consideration of the author’s Jewish identity when assessing her poetry. Writing from the perspective of a non-Christian woman, Levy, according to Scheinberg, exposed in her work the “alliance between Christian theology and the British poetic tradition.”

In the context of this present study the radical contribution of Levy’s poetics lies in its rejection of the dispassionate, self-disciplined subject and in its vindication (against the Arnoldian doctrine) of passionate, personal, and subjective poetry, later (in her masterpiece novel *Reuben Sachs*) recognized by the author as a possible means of resisting the self-disciplining pressures on *fin-de-siècle* women. Furthermore, her Jewish subject position seems to have provided Levy’s poetry with a language capable of expressing radically anti-Christian messages. Perhaps due to its emphasis on observance and its lack of official creed, Judaism seems to have made it more acceptable for the author to daringly question the very faith in God, exposed in her poetry as one of the arms of late-Victorian “biopower.”

In her 1883 tribute to a Scottish poet, James Thomson, Levy positioned herself against Matthew Arnold’s ideas that “great poetry” should communicate “universal truth” and instead passionately vindicated that kind of poetry, generally labeled “minor,” which gives expression to a specific and highly personal mood. Rather than extolling poetry produced from the position of (in Levy’s ironic words) a “prophet, standing above and outside things, to whom all sides of a truth (more or less foreshortened, certainly) are visible,” Levy’s essay makes a case for the value of poetry penned by “a passionately subjective being, with intense eyes fixed on one side of the solid polygon of truth, and realizing that one side with a fervour and intensity to which the philosopher with his birdseye view rarely attains” (501). Similarly, in Levy’s 1884 dramatic monologue “A Minor Poet,” the favorably portrayed character of a struggling writer (likely again inspired by Thomson) refuses to focus on the broader perspective rather than his own individual suffering: “I am myself, as each man is himself / Feels his own pain, joys his own joy, and loves / With his own love, no other’s . . . I can feel the pulse / A-beating at my heart, yet never knew / The throb of cosmic pulses . . . .”

In both of these texts, Levy exonerates a passionate, feeling subject position (rather than one detached and objectively impartial) as a recognizable poetic identity, and she advances the specific and personal (rather
than the sublime and universal) as acceptable concerns for the English poet. This move seems particularly interesting in the context of the already commented upon late-Victorian technologies of state control and their deployment of (particularly women’s) self-discipline to manage the “health” of the British nation. Beyond representing her rejection of the Arnoldian poetics, Levy’s ardent embrace of the individual and subjective can be viewed as possibly having been inspired (similar to Robins’ emphasis on individual self-determination) by her anxiety about, and her search for an alternative to, the scientific discourse’s faith in circumscribing individual decisions and desires according to the broader interests (defined by the gentile Victorian male scientist) of the national body.

Levy’s vindication of particularism and her exoneration of the passionate would have crucial implications for poetry written from the position of the Victorian female. While she chose a male poet figure for both of the above-mentioned texts asserting her anti-Arnoldian poetics (thus suggesting that she herself did not view the conventional division between the abstract male and the personal female as necessarily inherent), the language employed by Levy to describe her poetics will remind readers of the charges commonly weighed against nineteenth-century women poets and, until recently, used to bar their access to the English literary canon. In his famous address to the aspiring poet Aurora Leigh, “cousin Romney” names women’s presumed partiality for personal and specific concerns and their lack of objectivity (all qualities ardently embraced by Levy) as the main reasons why “We get no Christ from you,—and verily / We shall not get a poet, in my mind.” Levy’s “Minor Poet” seems a direct response to Romney, the quintessential Victorian male, who says to Aurora: “You generalize/ Oh, nothing,—not even grief! Your quick-breathed hearts, / So sympathetic to the personal pang / . . . incapable / Of deepening, widening a large lap of life . . . Women as you are, / Mere women, personal and passionate.”

The gender equation of the question of the personal and passionate versus the detached and abstract is foregrounded in Levy’s perhaps most powerful dramatic monologue, “Xantippe” (1881), which retells the story of Socrates’ traditionally much slandered wife from the woman’s perspective. The poem opposes Xantippe’s passionate way of speaking, grounded in her physical circumstances and personal experiences, to Socrates’ measured, solemn, and abstract rhetoric. At the climactic moment of the narrative, Socrates’ dismissive words about women, addressed to his male companions (“woman’s frail— / Her body rarely stands the test of soul,” 362), arouse his wife’s ardent response. But instead of appreciating the real meaning of Xantippe’s speech—which expresses her painful wish to have
her desire for knowledge recognized—Socrates remains detached and solemn and responds with irony: “From what high source, from what philosophies / Didst cull the sapient notion of thy words?” (363). Clearly, an argument springing from a woman’s life experiences and expressed in a visceral, physical language (“bleed,” “quiver,” “weep”) is not valid in the eyes of the great philosopher. While it is the male philosopher’s approach that is recognized by others (even by Xantippe) as the approach that makes for “great, deep wisdom,” the poem represents its detached impartiality as being also at the roots of Socrates’ neglect of his wife—thus suggesting links between Western philosophic tradition and Western civilization’s misogyny—and it validates Xantippe’s passionate, personal way of approaching life.

As Cynthia Scheinberg has underscored, Levy’s penchant for the specific and personal was a feature not just of her Victorian female identity but also of her Jewishness. Scheinberg lists the belief (rooted in the body/spirit distinction) that Christian faith is accessible to all individuals through conversion—the belief in universal truth—as one of the main distinctions between Christianity and Jewish theology: “though Judaism does participate within certain models of universalism, the voice of the unconverted Jewish writer is perceived—at least to the Christian community—as a voice of particularity, cultural, ethnic, and even national specificity, and as such, obstructs the assumed belief in transcendent, universal, spiritual identity.” Underscoring this generally recognized distinction between Christianity’s emphasis on the universal and Judaism’s greater focus on the concrete, Scheinberg sees the particular value of Levy’s poetics in its attempt to carve space out in the English literary tradition for poets committed to Jewish identity, who would be likely to harbor partiality for the concrete rather than the universal.

There were some striking similarities, Levy’s case reminds us, between the rhetoric employed by Victorian critics such as Arnold to guard the English literary canon from feminization and the language these critics used in their determination to shield the canon (and also the English national identity) from an overt Hebraic influence. While doubly marginalizing her, her subject position also seems to have sensitized Levy to these kinds of discursive intersections between gender and religious/cultural marginalization, and it equipped her well to view women’s oppression always in a specific religious and cultural context. Indeed, one of the features of Levy’s feminist poetry is that it locates an individual woman’s suffering in the hands of men within the context of broader structures of Western patriarchy. While at first appearing to be “neutrally Western,” a
closer look reveals that the patriarchal institutions targeted in Levy's poetry often belong specifically within the gentile tradition—that, as Scheinberg has foregrounded in her reading of “Magdalen,” these poems were written from a specifically Jewish perspective.

The dramatic monologue “Magdalen” (1884) is—along with “Xan- tippe: A Fragment” (1881) and “A Ballad of Religion and Marriage” (1888)—one of Levy's most ardently feminist poems. It has been read as Levy's contribution to the Contagious Diseases Acts debates and her passionate condemnation of the double gender standard inscribed into the language of the Acts' proponents. The final words of the protagonist, commonly interpreted as a sympathetically drawn Victorian “fallen woman,” addressed to her former lover who had infected her with a venereal disease, express a truly feminist rebellious and defiant determination:

The doctor says that I shall die.  
You, that I knew in days gone by,  
I fain to see your face once more,  
Con well its features o'er and o'er;  
And touch your hand and feel your kiss,  
Look in your eyes and tell you this:  
That all is done, that I am free;  
That you, through all eternity,  
Have neither part nor lot in me.21

Characteristic of her poetry, Levy chose as the setting for this poem one of the Magdalen Houses for fallen women that grounded women's moral reeducation in their Christian reform, and her feminist critique is here embedded within the woman character's dismissal of the puritanical practices used in this Victorian institution. As the speaker states, she finds hard to endure both the austere setting (“The bare, blank room where is no sun; / The parcelled hours; the pallet hard”) and the punitive tactics of shaming and exclusion (“The dreary faces here within; / The outer women's cold regard; / The Pastor's iterated 'sin;” 378), adopted to enforce the ascetic model of femininity onto her. When the dying woman proclaims, "I have no faith / In God or Devil, Life or Death" (380), the poem's condemnation of the Church's role in producing the quintessential ascetic Victorian woman can be read as entertaining the notion of atheism as one position that perhaps might allow women some sense of freedom from Victorian patriarchy. The very faith in God seems to be rejected here as one of the tools of the Victorian structures of disciplining power.

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It is interesting, at this point, to turn to Scheinberg's fascinating rereading of "Magdalen," which foregrounds Levy's Jewish background. In Scheinberg's interpretation, the title character, rather than being a nineteenth-century woman speaking to her ex-lover, represents the biblical Mary Magdalen addressing Jesus after his resurrection (and his transformation from a Jew into a Christian). This approach to the poem turns the "universally feminist" retelling of the story of the Victorian "fallen woman" into a text written from the more specific perspective of an "angry, unrepentant Jewish woman," who refuses to be converted, and her resistance can be seen as Levy's vehement commentary on the nineteenth-century English Protestants' obsession with conversion. In this reading, it is her Jewish identity that gives Magdalen access to the radical language which casts off faith in God as an intrusive Victorian institution.

Scheinberg's approach of foregrounding Levy's Jewish background can be also fruitfully applied to "A Ballad of Religion and Marriage." This radically feminist poem, which remained unpublished during Levy's life, uses humor to articulate and applaud the New Woman's growing discontent with the institution of matrimony:

Monogamous, still at our post,
Reluctantly we undergo
Domestic round of boiled and roast,
Yet deem the whole proceeding slow.
Daily the secret murmurs grow;
We are no more content to plod
Along the beaten paths—and so
Marriage must go the way of God. 24

The poem represents Levy's intervention in the marriage debate, which was particularly heated in 1888, following the publication of Mona Caird's feminist essay "Marriage." Similar to Caird, Levy here treats matrimony as a historical custom, but she goes further and uses the opportunity to once again question faith in God as well. Implying that both matrimony and religious faith are historical institutions whose histories are closely intertwined, she also suggests that both are already obsolete and will cease to exist one day: "Grant, in a million years at most, / Folk shall be neither pairs nor odd— / Alas! We sha'n't be there to boast / 'Marriage has gone the way of God'" (404).

Beckman reminds us that the word odd in the conclusion of the poem, while commonly used in fin-de-siècle Britain to refer to the "surplus"
women, was also one of the slang terms for lesbians, and that the text thus could have been read by Levy’s friends as eagerly forecasting not just the end of universal marriage but of prescribed heterosexuality as well. In this reading, Levy’s verses bring together, and suggest historical links between, three major institutions of patriarchy—universal marriage, religion, and compulsory heterosexuality.

A closer look will reveal that, similar to “Magdalen,” the voice that utters this poem’s revolutionary prophesy of a future free of invasive patriarchal institutions including God springs from a subject position that is unequivocally Jewish. In the verses predicting the final demise of religious icons, the icons are taken specifically from the Christian mythology:

Swept into limbo is the host
   Of heavenly angels, row on row;
The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
   Pale and defeated, rise and go.
The great Jehovah is laid low,
   Vanished his burning bush and rod—
Say, are we doomed to deeper woe?
   Shall marriage go the way of God? (404)

The heavenly angels and the Holy Trinity—imagined by the author as “pale and defeated”—are easily recognizable Christian images. But even “Jehovah”—a term commonly used to refer to God in the Old Testament, the God of the Israelites—is a specifically Christian expression. From the Jewish perspective, the term is viewed as a misspelling of “Yahweh” and is symbolic of the Christians’ misconception of the Scriptures. The term Jehovah, when used by a Jewish author, would connote the Christian convention of transforming the Judaic history for Christian purposes. It would be likely viewed by Levy’s Jewish readers as symbolic of the Victorian Protestant efforts to convert the Jews (which will be discussed in more detail in the context of Levy’s novel Reuben Sachs). Considered in this context, Levy’s poem has embedded within its feminist framework the author’s denunciation of Christian efforts to appropriate Jewish history, and her remarks concerning the demise of the faith in God can be read as referring specifically to the way in which Christianity has appropriated (and “killed”) the God of Sinai.

The already mentioned “Xantippe” is yet another poem by Levy that combines a feminist critique with a critique of a Western, non-Jewish institution—this time, Greek philosophy. As Karen Weisman has articulated
it, the historical Xantippe’s reputation “has come down to us in damning terms: she is the shrew who would lure her important husband away from his philosophic endeavor, insanely jealous, as the *Phaedo* has her, of his friends and colleagues.” In Levy’s rendition, Xantippe portrays herself as a passionate, unconventional woman who already in her youth “yearned for knowledge, for a tongue / That should proclaim the stately mysteries / Of this fair world, and of the holy gods.” Initially repulsed by the much older Socrates’ appearance, she eventually learns to love the philosopher, hoping that with his help, she would “lift the shrouding veil from things which be, / And at the flowing fountain of his soul / Refresh my thirsting spirit” (359–60). Reminiscent of Eliot’s Dorothea, whose hopes that Casaubon would guide her to “see the truth by the same light as great men” are painfully crushed, Xantippe is also gravely disappointed as the philosopher “deigned not to stoop to touch so slight a thing / As the fine fabric of a woman’s brain” (360). Xantippe’s ultimate response, her “fierce acceptance” of her feminine lot, is to some extent suggestive of Irigaray’s “mimicry” in its visibly exaggerated performance of the roles expected of a Greek maiden: “He wished a household vessel—well ’twas good, / For he should have it! ... I called my maidens, ordered out the loom, / And spun unceasing from the morn till eve” (364). But the great ironist seems to either entirely miss or entirely ignore the exaggerated nature of his own wife’s replay of femininity as she “[spins] away / The soul from out my body, the high thoughts / From out my spirit” (364).

The similarities between Levy’s Xantippe and Eliot’s Dorothea foreground Eliot’s writing’s anticipation of the New Woman authors’ call for women’s access to systematic education, while also underscoring the differences between Eliot’s and the next generation of women’s approach to the theme. Both Xantippe and Dorothea are women who, unsatisfied with the superficial schooling available to them as females, hope to gain wisdom from their marriage to much older men. Both are put in their place by their husbands—philosophers who turn out to be conventional patriarchs. But whereas Eliot’s narrative satirizes Dorothea as well as Casaubon, in whom even his shortsighted wife eventually recognizes a merely poor imitation of a philosopher, the poet’s voice in Levy’s poem is earnest. Her concern for Xantippe seems genuine—the text is a sincere defense of the maligned woman. And the character of Socrates, although condemned for his neglect of his wife, is portrayed as a “real” philosopher whose erudition is generally recognized. This nonsatirized approach to Socrates turns the feminist objections (inscribed into the poem) to the detached and abstract way of his reasoning into an unequivocal critique of the conventions of the
entire Western philosophical tradition, which views Socrates as its founding father.

Considering Levy’s decision to retell the story of Eliot’s Dorothea in “Xantippe” and considering Eliot’s own partiality for irony, it is interesting to hypothesize about the extent to which Levy’s critique of the Socratic ironic detachment was intended to implicate Eliot herself. Indeed, the minor figure of Aspasia—the one woman (described in the poem as “bold, with freedom, thought, and glib philosophy,” 363) whose intellectual abilities are recognized even by Socrates—could be read as perhaps symbolizing “Queen George” herself, and she is mentioned in Levy’s poem with resentment. As the analysis of Reuben Sachs will illustrate, “Xantippe” would not be the only occasion in Levy’s career when she would turn her objections to Eliot’s treatment of a theme into a masterpiece. While Levy would always maintain an attitude of some resentment toward the great Victorian authoress, she was also listed among her favorite writers, and her reading of Eliot’s novels (as well as Heine’s poetry) surely helped the young author to sharpen her own ironic tongue. If it was irony that “Xantippe” meant when she expressed her futile yearning for “a tongue that should proclaim the stately mysteries of this fair world” (358), Levy’s fiction demonstrates that she herself did gain access to it. Unlike the great Western master of the ironic Socrates, and true to her own feminist anti-Arnoldian poetics, in her best fiction Levy’s own ironic tongue was once again employed to validate the passionate and the personal. Furthermore, in Reuben Sachs, as I will argue, Levy experimented with irony in her efforts to cope with and possibly destabilize anti-Semitic stereotypes, which the increasingly pervasive at the fin de siècle evolutionary discourse was turning into the absolute.

GENDER AND COLONIAL ISSUES IN LEVY’S “GENTILE FICTION”

Levy’s woman-centered fictional texts tend to focus on a moment, always anxiety-ridden, of a marriage proposal between socially incompatible partners, and (with the exception of Reuben Sachs) they all include as central the same series of events: a marriage proposal, the woman character’s painful consideration of it, and her refusal followed by agonizing doubts and sense of personal failure. Thus the protagonist of Levy’s 1888 short story “Griselda,” after turning down the man whom she loves but who is her social inferior, does so with tears streaming down her face and her
hands trembling." In Levy's 1888 novel *The Romance of a Shop*, Gertrude's rejection of Lord Watergate is followed by an even more pronounced anguish and is accompanied by the narrator's observation that "she . . . had failed miserably." And Elsie in Levy's 1889 novella *Miss Meredith* reacts to her coerced rejection of her suitor with fainting and with a later remark: "I have spoilt my life." Almost always, the woman reconsiders her decision and ends up accepting the proposal, entering into what are alleged to be happy unions.

The striking difference between the radical interrogation of femininity and rejection of matrimony in Levy's poetry and the conventional use of the marriage trope in much of her fiction invites questions about the impact of genre and audience on gender politics inscribed into Victorian texts. Domestic fiction—with its conventional final union between the heroine and the hero—seems to have placed restrictions on Levy's interrogation of gender that poetry did not. Furthermore, while her poetry was written for a more sophisticated readership, a number of Levy's fictional texts were obviously produced with an eye on the commercial market. Levy was well aware, it seems, of what her popular audience desired and was willing to give them the sense of satisfaction a happy ending provides.

In this context, it is also interesting to consider Levy's choice of gentile, non-Jewish characters for most of her short stories and novels. It is in this gentile fiction that Levy was most willing to meticulously follow the conventions of Victorian realism, including the marriage scenario and the promulgation of the ascetic feminine ideal. Her Jewish novel, *Reuben Sachs*, on the other hand, offers a devastating interrogation of the happy marriage trope and demonstrates that Levy was at her best when free to narrate from the position of an Anglo-Jewish woman, the position she knew intimately. That most of Levy's short stories and novels consciously avoid Jewish heroines should prompt questions about the level of anti-Semitism among *fin-de-siècle* English women readers. Levy's preference for gentile heroines in her commercial fiction, while demonstrating her skill to take on various different personae, certainly suggests a suspicion on the author's part that her Christian readers would find Jewishness too heavily loaded, and that they would find it difficult to identify with (and might misinterpret) a Jewish woman character.

Before moving on to analyze Levy's Jewish contribution to the New Woman literary tradition, I will examine her gentile woman-centered fiction—specifically *The Romance of a Shop* (1888) and *Miss Meredith* (1889). While these texts do not offer any particularly radical interrogation of gender, they do feature sympathetically drawn, independent women.
Furthermore, they are interesting in their treatment of the colonial trope. Levy appears to have been well aware of the conventional use of the colonial space in Victorian realist tradition, and she embellished and even satirized the convention. The author’s flippant approach to the colonial theme in her writing seems indicative of her lesser investment in the British Empire when compared to other, more nationalistic New Woman writers such as Grand or Robins. Levy’s use of exaggeration in her gentle novels is also interesting in that it informs our reading of the embellishment and the fully blown ironic voice adopted by the author in her Jewish masterpiece.

Levy’s first novel, *The Romance of a Shop* (1888), tells the story of four Lorimer sisters, who, following their father’s loss of fortune and sudden death, resolve to set up a photography shop. While the sisters’ upper-middle-class relatives appear astonished at their decision, as Beckman has argued, by 1888 the theme of impoverished middle-class women taking up work to support themselves had become quite conventional. The novel is far from shockingly feminist, but it does sympathize with Lucy and Gertrude—the two sisters determined to make it on their own—while representing their ultra-conventionally feminine (half-) sister Fanny as anachronistic.

While Lucy and Gertrude toil hard in the shop, Fanny fails even in her role of housekeeper, the one role for which, one would assume, her traditional upbringing should have prepared her. She ends up being relegated to “the vague duty of creating an atmosphere of home” (89), performing such “essentially womanly” functions as pouring out tea (which procedure she does “with much action of the little finger,” 69). Her perfunctory feminine education has obviously left Fanny unprepared for anything besides the life of a prosperous man’s wife, and the narrative rescues her from her existence of inadequacy in the Lorimers’ household by marrying her off to Mr. Marsh, her old suitor, who is brought back (moneyed) from Australia just for that purpose. Fanny’s ironic lack of practical skills, along with the narrative decision to keep this couple childless, becomes the author’s comical commentary on English men’s taste in women, particularly when juxtaposed with (the youngest sister) Phyllis’ statement: “she has just the sort of qualities that men seem to think desirable in a wife and a mother!” (65).

Of the four Lorimer sisters, Gertrude is the novel’s main character. Her state of mind is the narrative’s focus, and she undergoes the development characteristic of Levy’s heroines when she rejects a marriage proposal from the good-hearted Lord Watergate, undergoes painful despair as she realizes she loves him, reconsiders and accepts Watergate, and ends up in a
happy union with him. Typical of Levy's fiction, the women characters in
The Romance of a Shop perceive marriage as "the most sensible course for a
woman to take" (191). But while the narrator insists that it is because they
believe in "love as the crown and flower of life" (131), the anxiety that
accompanies Gertrude's and her friend Conny's continuing (at least for a
while) single lifestyles does not seem to have much to do with love; instead,
it seems to reflect their elemental human fear of loneliness. Both characters
are repeatedly portrayed as distressed at the idea that their sisters/friends
would marry and they would remain alone. It is thus not the state of being
single in itself but rather the perceived lack of single women's community,
which they could join and which would give them a sense of belonging, that
frightens them and adds attraction to the option of matrimony.

Similar to those of Grand and Robins, the domestic, seemingly apolit-
ical, plots in Levy's woman-centered fiction have inscribed in them a
broader political commentary, and the marriage trope plays an essential
role in expressing it. But while in Grand's and Robins' texts the happy or
unhappy matrimony will signal the presumed compatibility or incompat-
ibility of specific social groups, Levy's presumably happy marriage always
unites partners who would be commonly considered socially incompatible,
and the author uses the couple's community's acceptance or rejection of the
union to comment on the level of openness or exclusivity of the commu-
nity in question. In The Romance, the proposal to Gertrude—struggling to
maintain her middle-class status—from Lord Watergate, which meets
with no visible objections on the side of Watergate's peer relatives, sug-
gests a rather extraordinary open-mindedness of English aristocracy as
portrayed by Levy and will provide a striking contrast to her later repre-
sentation of the Anglo-Jewish, upper-middle class community's rigid
exclusiveness in Reuben Sachs.

The suggestion of eugenicist reasoning that surrounds the narrative's
choice of Watergate and Gertrude as the model couple foreshadows some
of Grand's narrative techniques, although the vocabulary of physiognomy
is not as prominent in Levy's text. Her novel, in a Jane Eyre—like fashion,
refuses the beautiful Phyllis as the heroine and breaks off the potentially
most "romantic" relationship in the novel between her and the infamous
sensualist, Sidney Darrell. Phyllis' pale, exquisite beauty seems to predesti-
tine her in Levy's book to be not only a languid, restless character fond of
sensual pleasures but also one with a predisposition to sickness. She arrests
Lord Watergate's attention, but the "great physiologist" (121) chooses the
sensible and healthy Gertrude for the mother of his children. No doubt the
scientist, openly interested in physiognomy, sees Gertrude much as the
narrator does in the following description: “If the arching forehead and mobile face bespoke imagination and keen sensibilities, the square jaw and resolute mouth gave token, no less, of strength and self-control” (78). While initially attracted to Phyllis, Watergate resists sensual beauty (always associated in the novel with sickness) and chooses Gertrude, whose features presumably indicate a solid character rooted in self-discipline. The morally upright, mentally sound, and physically healthy part of English aristocracy and middle class are united in this eugenicist novel to produce a stout and rosy-cheeked generation (such is the narrator’s dutiful description of Watergate and Gertrude’s son), while the morally corrupt segment of the population is weeded out. Phyllis dies of consumption, and Darrell, the aesthete, is dispatched by the narrative to Indian margins. Conspicuously drawing upon Brontë’s heroine’s prescription of asceticism and self-discipline as characteristics desirable in women and necessary for the future of the English nation (while taking it a step further by associating sensualism with sickness, and self-discipline with health), Levy’s novel reminds us of the preoccupation with the prudent management of the English middle-class which had existed in English women’s texts (such as Jane Eyre) even before Galton turned it into a science in the 1880s.

The Romance (and Levy’s gentile fiction in general) would appear to anticipate Grand in embracing the ideal of ascetic femininity promulgated in the Victorian discourse of evolution and eugenics. Still, the novel’s endorsement of the conventional ascetic feminine subject constructed through self-denial and discipline seems highly inconsistent with Levy’s vehement rejection of this same model of femininity in her poetry (and also in Reuben Sachs). For a reader already familiar with Levy’s work, this incongruity would inspire questions about how seriously this text should be taken. Indeed, there are various signs in The Romance suggesting that rather than taken at face value, the book should be perhaps read (as Beckman has argued) as a parody of both the realist and the aesthetic Victorian literary schools. I will limit my discussion of this question to Levy’s ironized treatment of the colonial trope, which I believe affects the reader’s final impression of the seriousness of the concern expressed in the book over the future of the English nation.

As the narrative treatment of Mr. Marsh, Fanny’s fiancé, suggests, Levy’s novel draws on the reality of British colonialism in ways that were quite conventional in the Victorian novel. Indeed, Fanny’s suitor is not the only male character who is dispatched by the narrative to a colony to make a fortune and come back rich and marry his English fiancée. A similar fate
awaits Lucy's suitor Frank, a poor artist who makes his living as a newspaper illustrator. He proposes to Lucy, only to set off on a journey to Africa where his assignment to cover an unspecified colonial skirmish is expected to improve his prospects. Also, in another blatant discursive use of the reality of British colonialism, a man vaguely interested in Gertrude loses his interest upon the loss of her fortune and sets off for India, an event that, while somewhat distressing her, temporarily frees Gertrude from the conventional fate of marriage and makes the plot of Levy's novel possible. Finally, before the Lorimer sisters can set up their shop, they are obliged to resist their relatives' plans to send two of them off to India with hopes that they would get married there. As their aunt Caroline puts it, “Girls don't seem to marry in these days! . . . but India works wonders sometimes in that respect” (72).

In an ostensibly formulaic way, the British colonies represent in Levy's novel the margins of the text's world into which certain characters can be relegated and from which others unexpectedly emerge just as the narrative requires it. The colonies serve here as a source of wealth for middle-class women like Fanny who are unprepared for anything below a life of affluent leisure. They serve women like Lucy by providing her initially rather irresolute fiancé with the kind of experience (when he, following the British troops' defeat in Africa, goes unaccounted for) that ensures he will enter into the state of matrimony a more mature man. And they swallow Gertrude's first suitor, thus creating circumstances that make the sisters' decision to become independent acceptable for the Victorian reader. Levy seems here to be consciously and candidly rehearsing all of the clichéd Victorian narrative uses of colonialism—the only customary colonial subplot missing is a Lorimer brother returning from America at an opportune moment when the sisters need him most.

Indeed, the conventions are here engaged so dutifully and in such an embellished way that readers cannot help suspecting that the author might be actually poking fun at them. When Fanny's prediction of Frank's return—that “people always come back in books” (166)—is fulfilled, the reader's attention is drawn both to the realist tradition's use of the colonial trope and to Levy's consciously exaggerated engagement of it in her own novel. Another occasion in the narrative which signals to the reader that the author's rehearsal of the clichéd use of the colonial might be deliberate and tongue-in-cheek is Phyllis' statement concerning Fan's old suitor, who, as she says with a “note of irony in her voice,” “has come back to marry Fan, like a person in a book.” “A touching tale of young love, is it not?” she adds (italics mine; 143). And making the irony of her previous assessment
unmistakable, Phyllis notes: “Perhaps it takes the bloom off it a little, that Edward Marsh married on the way out. But his wife died last year, so it is all right” (143). The colonial subplot is not simply adopted here from the Victorian realist tradition and reasserted but rather (to use Luce Irigaray’s words) is “replayed with ironic difference.”

As Linda Hutcheon has articulated it, irony—whereby “you say something you don’t actually mean and expect people to understand not only what you actually do mean but also your attitude towards it”—has an edge. It uses the language of the dominant discourse as its “said,” but it also manages to express an evaluative, even judgmental attitude (its “unsaid”) on the part of the author toward that very discourse. While Hutcheon herself emphasizes the transideological nature of the ironic mode, she concedes that especially in feminist and minority circles, irony has been lauded for its potential to destabilize, and it is often viewed as a particularly appropriate strategy for those with “the divided allegiance that comes from their difference from the dominant norms of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual choice.” “The marginalized,” Hutcheon explains, “can be heard by the center, and yet keep its critical distance and thus unbalance and undermine.”

Frank Stringfellow’s psychoanalytical study of irony is also helpful in explaining why this literary device would be attractive to somebody in Levy’s position. The ironic mode, Stringfellow argues, enables the speaker to both identify with authority figures and at the same time convey through various signals (such as exaggeration or antithesis) his or her conscious or unconscious contempt for them. He explains: “[while] maintaining the precepts of authority, the ironist transforms them in such a way as to expose both their absurdity and his contempt for them.”

Levy’s preference for gentile heroines and for the concerns of the gentile world in her fiction as well as her careful emulation of the conventions of Victorian realism are certainly suggestive of the author’s desire to identify with the hegemonic discourse. This desire was undoubtedly motivated by her suspicion that such an identification was a necessary precondition of any Anglo-Jewish Victorian author’s success at reaching the commercial reader. At the same time, the ironic treatment of issues with such grave implications for the Victorians as British colonialism suggests the author’s distance from the hegemonic English discourse. Using irony thus enabled Levy to emulate both the formulas of the Victorian literary tradition and the concerns of the English nation, making sure her texts would reach the intended audience, and to express (in a more or less encoded way) a certain level of contempt for these conventions and concerns.
Miss Meredith (1889) is another gentile woman-centered novel by Levy that was obviously written with an eye on the popular market and that is unabashedly indebted to Jane Eyre. The “little grey” Elsie Meredith accepts a governess position in a prominent, ancient Italian family of the Brogis in Pisa only to make Andrea—the family’s younger son, just returned from America—fall in love with her. Much to the dismay of his family, Andrea proposes to the penniless English governess rather than to the gorgeous Italian heiress Costanza, the woman intended for him. Elsie accepts his marriage proposal, is later forced by Andrea’s mother to retract her promise, but eventually is accepted by the Brogis for their son’s sake and ends up engaged to this handsome, Bertha-free version of Rochester.

Compared to The Romance, this novel seems to be a more earnest attempt on the author’s part at following Victorian realism and writing a (more popularized) version of Brontë’s famous text. There are fewer signals in this piece that would invite an ironic reading, particularly concerning its handling of the English-Italian theme—the novel’s equivalent of the colonial trope. Still, the reader of Miss Meredith does occasionally get a suspicion that, rather than being entirely sincere, the author might be again par-odying some of the literary devices she is here employing. The clichés of Victorian domestic realism—like the heroine’s (Jane Eyre–like) restless pacing down the gallery, or her declaration (also Jane Eyre–like) that her “forlorn and pensive mood of ten minutes ago had vanished,” repeated in various versions every time Andrea enters the scene—are so exaggerated in Levy’s novel that they are exposed for what they are: literary clichés. Furthermore, there are moments in the narrative that direct our attention to the process of reading and make a case for the act of interpretation being more intricate and texts (including perhaps Miss Meredith itself) being more multilayered than they might appear.

One occasion that directly draws attention to the interpretive challenges with which a text can face a reader is a little tête-à-tête between Elsie and Annunziata, Andrea’s sister-in-law. The generally kind-hearted Annunziata takes Elsie aside after a dance at which Andrea visibly singled the governess out, ostensibly to chit-chat innocently about Emilie, a young woman of no means who has been presumably foolishly misinterpreting Andrea’s attentions for love. “He has a way with him,” Annunziata comments about Andrea, “which is open to misinterpretation” (335). Elsie agonizes over the intended meaning of this little talk. One instant she reacts haughtily, fierce with the conviction that Annunziata’s seemingly innocuous conversation about a stranger was really about herself, that “this was a warning, a warning to me” (335). The next instant she repents her haughty
response and perceives Annunziata as a “guileless lady . . . Prattling on, no
doubt as usual, as a relief to her own feelings, and not with any underlying
intention” (336). While this seems to be Elsie’s final reading of the chat, it
is actually the first interpretation—the one which suspected ulterior
motives on the part of the speaker—that the narrative seems to eventually
endorse.

The novel also offers some clues that suggest the author’s misgivings
about the Victorian audience’s powers of interpretation. The one English
couple, described as being “of the most commonplace type” (312), whose
commentary on a work of art (in this case Andrea del Sarto’s St. Cathar-
ine in Pisa’s cathedral) is overheard and recorded by Elsie, comments thus
on the famous painting:

“It’s like your sister Nellie,” said the man.

“Nonsense! Nellie isn’t half so fat, and she never did her hair like that
in her life. Why, you wouldn’t know Nellie without her fringe,” answered
the woman in a superior way as they moved off to the next object of inter-
est mentioned in Baedecker. (312)

The homesick Elsie, who has been watching the tourists with much nos-
talgia, observes that “the sound of their English voices was almost too
much for my self-control” (312). But the ambiguous wording of this
remark opens the text up to other than the literal reading. Is the seeming-
ly sentimentally homesick Elsie actually laughing at the English Philistine
couple and, by extension, perhaps some portions of her readership as well?
Might we interpret the above scene as Levy’s derisive comment on a liter-
al response to art and as her suggestion that readers should not approach
her own texts as nonmimetic?

Elsie—I agree with Beckman 46—is not a New Woman. Not even jour-
neying to Italy, celebrated by many English travelers as a place where they
felt less socially inhibited,47 and making her own living turns Elsie into an
independent woman with any identifiable unconventional ambitions.
Levy’s novel thus does not follow the tradition in Victorian women’s travel
writing of using the colonial margins to experiment with new definitions
of womanhood. Of course, while being, until the 1870s, a subjugated
nation, and while being a place that the English had been infatuated with
and Grand Touring since at least the early eighteenth century, Italy was not
a British colony. It seems paradoxical that the Victorians, who had no
qualms about their own colonization of other nations, did strongly sympa-
thize with Garibaldi and the Italian nationalist cause, and that their
(mostly unofficial) support played such a key role in the Italian Risorgimento. According to Maura O'Connor, this seeming inconsistency resulted from the fact that the Italian peninsula occupied a very different place in English cultural and political imagination than its own overseas colonies did. Throughout the nineteenth century, Italy was viewed by the British as “the original home of European civilization, from which . . . middle-class English men and women claimed direct descent.”48 Since the Victorians identified with Italy’s past greatness and perceived the peninsula as “the historical birthplace of imperial cultural conquest,”49 the Italian nation’s fragmentation and subjugation under the French, Austrian, and papal rules—unlike their own colonization of non-European and, in their eyes, culturally inferior peoples—struck the English as tragic.

Still, despite the distinct standing of Italy in English cultural imagination, Victorian travelers to, and writers on, Italy distinguished between the grand ancient Roman nation and the present-day Italians, and—much like the travelers to British colonies—they generally aspired to teaching the modern Italians the English virtues of self-discipline, duty, and utilitarianism. Many accepted the notion that Italy could once again become a grand nation if only the present-day Italian national character—viewed by Victorians as indolent and unsystematic—could be reformed after the English self-image of superior efficiency.50 As O’Connor has pointed out, in the texts and speeches organized by the Society of the Friends of Italy, Victorian tourists to Italy were openly encouraged to act as social and cultural critics.51 Not dissimilar to Victorian colonial travelers, English tourists to Italy were thus expected to represent the presumed superiority of their “imperial race” to the Italians, hopefully inspiring in them the desire to emulate the English national character.

And this is exactly what Elsie aspires to in Levy’s text set in Pisa, a city the author likely visited herself during her 1886 stay in Florence. Levy’s narrative does seem driven by a desire on the part of Elsie to appropriate, and anglicize, the Italian setting. The governess truly “carries England with herself” wherever she goes, and she unabashedly judges the Italian lifestyle by her English middle-class standards. She sneers at the Italian accent, brings the English way of waltzing into the Brogi ball-dance, and, in her imagination, peoples the Italian palaces with images of all the English Romantic writers who once visited Pisa. Even the hero, Andrea—much prized by all the novel’s women—is anglicized and taken possession of by both English culture and the English heroine. Whereas his older brother, Romeo, is described as carrying on “the ancestral pursuit of doing nothing” (313), Andrea has distressed his patrician parents with his determination.
to make his own living and is—after spending the last five years in America working as an engineer—now almost entirely anglicized. While Romeo is handsome but “genuinely indolent” (331), embodying all that the Victorians believed was wrong with the modern Italian “race,” Andrea is described as keenly vital and alert (331). He thus represents the sort of new Italian gentleman remade in the Protestant image of hard work and willpower, which the Victorians believed necessary for the reformation of the Italian nation.

Elsie’s sharpest castigation is aimed at the Brogi women. Their ceaseless chatting (“the business of their lives,” 315) is unfavorably contrasted with English reticence and represented as symbolizing the Italian women’s inefficient idleness and superficiality. The Brogi domestic space, over which the women preside in a rather vague way, is being continuously unfavorably compared by the narrator (Elsie) to her less grand but cozier English home. The Italian servants’ tardiness goes un-rebuked by their master/mistress, the palace is left unheated and chilly in winter, and, most of all, one’s privacy is being incessantly disrespected here, the governess complains. While her family’s humble household appears small and cramped when compared to the splendor and vastness of the Italian palazzo, Elsie nostalgically observes—in a remark that seems to have an underlying political meaning—that “at home, the liberty of the individual had always been greatly respected, which was, perhaps, the reason why we managed to live together in such complete harmony” (319). And just as the narrative dwells on the advantages of the efficient English domestic space, it similarly insists on the cultural and moral superiority of Elsie’s English character in her relationship with Bianca (her Italian charge), in which the initially condescending Bianca ends up following the governess “like a dog” (313). Reminiscent of the treatment of Jane Eyre’s French pupil in Brontë’s novel, the eighteen-year-old Bianca (and with her also Italy) is being discursively infantilized by Elsie, who describes her as a “crude, instinctive creature, so curiously undeveloped for her time of life” (313) and who finds it necessary to treat Bianca, her junior by only three years, “like a child” (320).

On several occasions in the narrative, the comparison between the (as they are represented here) Italian aesthetic and English pragmatic characters takes on the form of a fashion battle, in which Bianca’s uncomfortably high heels, elaborately dressed hair, and stiff waist lose overwhelmingly to the English governess’ sensible walking shoes, grey merino gown, and simply braided hair. And Elsie’s plain but neat black dancing dress defeats even her rival Costanza’s gorgeous gown of richest brocade and gleaming
rubies. Through the comparison between Elsie and the Italian women, the main objective of which seems to be to outline the Italian “character,” the English woman’s national “character” emerges as well, as presumably distinguished by sensibility, reticence, self-reflection, self-control, and efficiency.

Or this at least is the image Elsie, the narrator of this first-person story, seems to wish that the reader take away from her tale. However, in various ways, this picture is being undermined in Levy’s book. While Elsie likes to express her shock at the Italian lack of prudence and to draw attention to Bianca’s childish behavior, her outburst that “if I am not liked I shall die” (340) exposes her own immaturity. Furthermore, her hasty acceptance of Andrea’s hand (while to some extent likely dictated by the genre conventions52) can hardly be considered very prudent. In quite obvious ways, Levy pokes fun at her English heroine, and the narrative’s treatment of her seems to signal to the reader that she is not to be taken entirely seriously. On various occasions the text certainly undermines the credibility of what Elsie says. For instance, Elsie responds to her sister’s prophecy that she will attract an Italian Rochester with a vehement, “I have always considered Mr. Rochester the most unpleasant person that ever a woman made herself miserable over” (298). By the end of the novel she is engaged to a man who, while good-looking, well-mannered, and single, still reminds one (through his obstinacy and his overall position) strongly of Rochester. This engagement, furthermore, takes place despite the heroine’s even more vehement earlier avowal to Andrea that “I will never, never marry you” (349). Also, Elsie’s heated announcement to Annunziata that “with us [the British] the reason for getting married is that you are fond of some one” (335) sounds foolish when read in light of her rushed acceptance of Andrea’s proposal. At the time of their engagement, their relationship is so insubstantial (Andrea hasn’t even had time to learn Miss Meredith’s first name) that it is hard to imagine that the two could be truly “fond” of each other.

Indeed, although the novel’s ending (when the Brogis accept the union of Andrea and Elsie which they initially opposed) seems to announce her final defeat (and the governess’s triumph), it is the Marchesa, Andrea’s proud Italian mother, who perhaps best approximates maturity in the book. While certainly not an unequivocally sympathetic character, the Marchesa’s final articulation of her concerns remains unmatched by anything the English heroine herself says in the novel and perhaps can be read as an Italian rebuke of the English traveler’s intrusiveness. In this context, it is interesting to consider Levy’s earlier comments regarding her perceived sense of affinities between the Jews and the Italians.
ing similarities in the appearance of the Jewish people and Florentines, Levy wrote in her 1886 essay “The Ghetto at Florence”: “Who knows but that, long ago, those old and mystic races, the Etrurians and Semites, were kinsfolk, pasturing their flocks together in Asia Minor?” Considering these observations, one might suspect that Levy exploits this filiation for tactical purposes, having her novel’s Italians serve as a proxy for the attitudes and misunderstandings the English tended to direct at the Jews. Both of these factors can be taken as coming into play in the sense of kinship that appears to be reasserting itself in the increasingly (toward the end of the novel) sympathetic portrayal of the Marchesa, as well as in the Marchesa’s compelling speech:

... there are traditions, feelings, sacred customs, and emotions belonging to the family where you have been received of which you can have no knowledge. That is not required, nor expected of you. What is expected of you, as of every right-minded person, is that you should at least respect what is of such importance to others. Is this the case? Have you not rather taken delight in outraging our feelings in their most delicate relations; in tramping, in your selfish ignorance, on all that we hold most dear? (345)

Thus while the match between the cherished son of the Brogis and Elsie is certainly meant to be read as symbolically uniting the English Protestant sensibility with a new, anglicized version of modern Italy, the figure that represents English sensibility in the text is ironized and mocked. Winning over Andrea—who is “looked to for the carrying on of [the Brogi] race” (345)—for herself, the English governess fulfills the Victorian readers’ desire to perceive themselves as a nation whose cultural superiority is generally recognized and also as a nation capable of elevating the Italians (or at least those among them willing to learn) to a new glory. But to a perceptive reader, Elsie’s conquest—when weighed against the Italian family’s ancestral concerns so articulately expressed by the Marchesa—would likely appear as a rather willful and selfish usurpation. Such a reader would leave Levy’s text with a very different, and more critical, perception of the Victorians’ attitude toward the rest of the world.

IRONY IN REUBEN SACHS

Where the various national and social communities portrayed by Levy in her gentile fiction all end up accepting the marriages of their members to
(in their eyes) socially inferior outsiders and are thus represented as fairly inclusive, the same cannot be said about the upper-middle-class Anglo-Jewish community as it is depicted in Reuben Sachs (1888). Reuben—the 27-year-old barrister with political ambitions, the pride of the prominent Sachs family of London stockbrokers—has internalized his family’s resolution that “he must marry money” (197), and he successfully resists his desire to propose to the woman he loves, his beautiful but poor distant relative Judith Quixano. The violent consequences of Reuben’s community’s exclusiveness are underscored by Levy’s choices in the plot development. Levy’s favorite narrative pattern—a proposal to the heroine from a beloved if socially incompatible man, her initial rejection, reconsideration, final acceptance, and happy marriage—stutters in Reuben Sachs as the ambitious Reuben’s imminent proposal to Judith is averted at the last minute. Judith—in a move unprecedented in Levy’s fiction—receives and eventually accepts the marriage proposal from the “wrong man,” the wealthy but foolish convert to Judaism, Bertie Lee-Harrison, entering into a relationship compared ominously by the narrator to that of Gwendolen and Grandcourt in Eliot’s “Jewish novel.”54 Reuben’s family is punished by the narrative for its clannishness and materialism when it loses its “crowning splendor” (216). Deprived of the only woman who could (in Judith’s own words) “administer to his needs” (270), Reuben suddenly dies of overwork, just as he has achieved his political ambition of becoming a conservative member of parliament. Levy’s book thus offers a scathing critique of both the upper-middle-class Anglo-Jewry’s abandonment of idealism for materialism55 and that community’s stifling patriarchy.

Although the fact that Judith’s marriage cuts her off from the Jewish community will eventually seriously undermine this impression of acceptance of the Jews among the book’s gentiles, Lee-Harrison’s aristocratic gentile relatives accept his choice of a nonwealthy Jewish bride without any apparent reservations. Their response to the engagement contrasts with the clearly hesitant feelings that Judith’s Jewish friends and family have about the match, before finally accepting it for the sake of the bridegroom’s wealth. This conspicuous contrast might be perhaps read as another sign that the novel was meant as a commentary on the upper-middle-class Anglo-Jewish society’s tendencies toward exclusiveness. Rather than a loose religious community open to outsiders, the Anglo-Jewish characters are portrayed in Levy’s novel as perceiving themselves in terms of a biologically related tribe/clan suspicious of newcomers. Although most of Judith’s relatives and acquaintances end up recognizing her engagement, their match is considered “a little dimmed by the fact of Bertie’s not being
of the Semitic race” (281). Mrs. Quixano’s initial objection to her daughter’s suitor because “he is not a Jew” (277) and another character’s remark that “after all, he is not one of us” (227) indicate that Lee-Harrison’s (earlier) conversion and even his acceptance to the synagogue do not yet make a “real Jew” of him in the eyes of Levy’s Anglo-Jewish community.

When Reuben Sachs first appeared, it became immediately popular and shortly went into a second edition, but the book also met with severe censure in the Anglo-Jewish press for its presumed anti-Semitism. While the Jewish Chronicle’s initial response was an indirect rebuke, in summer 1889 an unsigned reviewer returned to Levy’s novel, calling it “offensive.” The Jewish Standard resorted to parodying the novel, while the Jewish World attacked Levy directly for presumably “delight[ing] in the task of persuading the general public that her own kith and kin are the most hideous types of vulgarity.”

Indeed, Levy’s text, which in its inclusion of explanations of Jewish customs shows signs of having been written at least to some extent for the gentile reader, rehearses a number of conventional anti-Jewish stereotypes that abounded in fin-de-siècle English literature. The figure of “the Jew as the hysteric”—so popular (as Sander Gilman has pointed out) in late-Victorian medical and popular literature—greets the reader of Levy’s novel in the characters of Judith’s neurotic, delicate, and effeminate cousin Earnest, and of her uncle, “poor Kohnthal,” confined in an asylum. Even Reuben had been, prior to the narrative’s opening, sent off on a journey to Australia following a nervous breakdown. In “one of her appalling bursts of candour,” Esther—“poor Kohnthal’s” daughter, perhaps the novel’s most perceptive and intelligent woman—comments: “There is always either a ne’er-do-weel [sic] or an idiot in every Jewish family!” (199).

Another stereotype pointed out in Gilman’s study of fin-de-siècle representations of Jews that Levy employs in her novel is “the Jewish accent,” a specific manner of speaking associated often with the presumed specificity of Jewish physiognomy. Despite Reuben’s family’s English roots, the narrative describes Reuben’s voice as pleasant, but also as “unmistakably the voice of a Jew” (199). Indeed, the description of both Reuben’s physical features and his character abound in conventional stereotypes:

He wore good clothes, but they could not disguise the fact that his figure was bad, and his movements awkward; unmistakably the figure and movements of a Jew. And his features, without presenting any marked national trait, bespoke no less clearly his Semitic origin. His complexion was of a dark pallor; the hair, small moustache and eyes, dark, with red lights in
them; over these last the lids were drooping, and the whole face wore for the moment a relaxed, dreamy, impassive air, curiously Eastern, and not wholly free from melancholy. (200–201)

Overall, Reuben is portrayed as both sensuously “Oriental” at moments and aggressively masculine and capitalistic when it comes to his own material interests. Indeed, not only the hero but the whole Sachs “tribe” (a term frequently used by the narrator) is depicted in gender-ambiguous language, an aspect that the Victorian reader must have found particularly unsettling. They can forget themselves in effeminately sensuous, dreamy reverie—such as when they listen to (Reuben and Judith’s cousin) Leo Leuniger’s violin and their “keen faces” become softened with “far-away air of dreamy sensuousness” (207). But both their men and their women can also be aggressively materialistic. Reuben’s ruthless rejection of Judith is, for instance, explained by his “instinctive aversion to making a bad bargain” (242). And the old Solomon Sachs (the founder of the family wealth) is described as having “been a hard man in his dealings with the world; never over-stepping the line of legal honesty, but taking advantage wherever he could do so with impunity,” except in his treatment of his own kin. “[T]o his own kindred,” the narrator adds, “he had always been generous; the ties of race, of family, were strong with him” (215). The notion implied or openly stated in much Victorian literature that “the Jew” represents a sort of Eastern menace in “our own midst” could not be spelled out more explicitly in Levy’s (evidently gentile in this section of the book) narrator’s portrayal of Reuben and his family. Reading such descriptions, one can almost hear the Victorian reader’s objections to this “Eastern menace,” which (driven by the presumably unabashedly materialistic Semitic creed) have been evidently robbing their English neighbors (disadvantaged by their presumably more humanistic Christian doctrine) of their share.

As these conventional anti-Semitic stereotypes are found in a novel written by an Anglo-Jewish woman, one is tempted to see this text as an example of Jewish self-hatred, theorized by Gilman as a type of response on the part of some Jews to the “projections of the dominant society concerning themselves.” Anxious about the weaknesses ascribed to them by the dominant society, the self-hating Jews, according to Gilman, project this inner anxiety onto the Jewish Other—onto a specific group of Jews (in this case, the grossly materialistic upper-middle-class Anglo-Jewry) from which they simultaneously distance themselves. However, in the case of Reuben Sachs, I agree with Beckman’s suggestion that the matter is more
complicated here. While she emphasizes that the negative attitudes about Jews rehearsed in Levy’s novel are not directly rejected here, Beckman reads the text as an “exploration of the theme of Jewish self-hatred” rather than as being driven by it. Indeed Levy—similar to her other fiction—uses exaggeration and irony in Reuben Sachs to persistently undermine what the characters and even the narrator say, thus problematizing our reading of the novel at face value. As they are applied to Levy’s novel, irony, exaggeration, and unreliable narrator (who seems gentile at some moments and Jewish at others) challenge its interpretation as a straightforward expression of Jewish self-hatred and suggest that what is stated here about Jews is not necessarily meant as the final truth about them.

Already Esther’s early remark (quoted above) about the “ne’er-do-well’s” presumably harbored by every Jewish family, seems comical in its exaggeration, especially in its original context, where it follows the narrator’s overview of Reuben’s siblings:

Adelaide was the eldest of the family . . . Reuben was scarcely two years her junior; no one cared to remember the age of Lionel, the youngest of the three, a hopeless ne’er-do-weel, who had with difficulty been relegated to an obscure colony.

“There is always either a ne’er-do-weel or an idiot in every Jewish family!” Esther Kohnthal had remarked in one of her appalling bursts of candour. (199)

The weight of the narrator’s remark about Reuben’s younger brother seems diminished by the humor of Esther’s subsequent observation. In explicitly articulating and confronting them with what gentile Victorian readers would be likely thinking when reading the narrator’s words about Lionel, perceptive readers might sense that their expectations are here being met too readily. One cannot help seeing a glimpse of the author’s tongue-in-cheek face behind Esther’s remark, laughing at the conventional generalizations with which she is confronting her reader. And Esther’s comment is only one among numerous other (always subtle) signals that Levy is here poking fun at, and consciously embellishing, Victorian stereotypes about Jews. Other examples of exaggerations can be found in Levy’s descriptions of the rich, heavy dresses and abundant jewelry worn by (and almost suffocating) some of the wealthy Jewish women characters. Esther, for instance, is described as “a small, dark, gnome-like creature, apparently entirely overpowered by the rich, untidy garments she was wearing” (203). Or consider this remark about Judith’s aunt Ada: “She was wearing
a quantity of valuable lace, very much crumpled, and had a profusion of
diamonds scattered about her person” (25). While these descriptions play
another important function in suggesting how restricted and stifled
women of the upper-middle-class Anglo-Jewry feel, they also seem to sig-
nal that Levy’s portrayal of Jews should be read as ironic and as to some
extent caricaturing the conventional stereotypes.

Irony is used by Levy to constantly undermine what is explicitly stated
in her novel. For instance, during Leo and Reuben’s conversation about
the flaws and virtues of their community, which forms the philosophical
center of Levy’s novel, the idealist Cambridge student complains about
the Anglo-Jewry’s materialism: “‘Ah, look at us,’ he cried with sudden
passion, ‘where else do you see such eagerness to take advantage; such
sickening, hideous greed; such cruel, remorseless striving for power and
importance; such ever-active, ever-hungry vanity, that must be fed at any
cost?’” (238).

While Leo’s disdain for his community in this (certainly genuinely
meant by him) reproach might first tend to confirm the gentile reader’s
worst assumptions, the narrator ironizes the speech and undercuts its effect
by referring to it as “poor Leo’s heroics” (239) and by announcing that the
young speaker’s mind-set is not final and will indeed change. Furthermore,
Leo’s point of view—however passionately and authentically conveyed—is
counterbalanced by Reuben’s more favorable (also authentically sounding)
opinion, in which he first historicizes his community’s emphasis on eco-
nomic advantages and then highlights its strengths and virtues: “Have you
forgotten for how long, and at what a cruel disadvantage, the Jewish peo-
ple has gone its way, until at last it has shamed the nations into respect?
Our self-restraint, our self-respect, our industry, our power of endurance,
our love of race, home and kindred, and our regard for their ties—are none
of these things to be set down to our account?” (239). The narrative
appears to lend authority to Reuben’s side in this argument by represent-
ing him as a more mature man to whom the younger Leo obviously looks
up. On the other hand, when Leo predicts that English Jews will inevitably
end up being absorbed by the mainstream English society, that the “race”
will disintegrate, the weight of Reuben’s passionate reply that “if we are to
die as a race, we shall die harder than you think” (240) seems diminished
by his own premature and quick death (which appears even more ironic in
the light of another of his early statements that in his family, “we never
die,” 198). And the credence of Reuben’s fervent prophecy, which con-
cludes the conversation and which is depicted as kindling a sense of pas-
sionate bond between the speaker and Judith, that the affinity and love the
Jews feel for each other will protect the “race” from dying out, is further undermined by Reuben's own failure to live up to it.

Judith is also a target of Levy's narrative irony. The reader is told of her at the beginning that “to marry a Gentile would have been quite out of the question for her” (209), only to see her eventually married to Lee-Harrison, the sincerity of whose conversion to Judaism is being constantly undercut by the narrative.65 And while the pragmatic Judith’s quiet but “considerable contempt” (209) for the family idealists and poetry patrons Esther and Leo would seem to signal to the reader to dismiss the two, it is ironically a book of poetry Judith finds on Leo’s bookshelf that brings to her the much-needed relief at a time of emotional crisis. Indeed, again rather ironically, the “good sense,” which distinguishes Reuben from his idealist cousins and which Judith so admires about him, actually utterly fails Judith in the end by driving Reuben away from her.

While irony had been Levy’s favorite narrative technique prior to Reuben Sachs, reading George Eliot’s 1876 novel Daniel Deronda—to which her text is openly a response—must have further inspired her to utilize this device. Levy signals to the reader that she was thinking about Daniel Deronda while writing her own “Jewish novel” both by means of explicit references to Eliot’s book and by creating parallels between Judith and Gwendolen Harleth. Another sign of Levy’s preoccupation with Eliot's novel is its brief assessment in her 1886 article, “The Jew in Fiction.” In this article, published in The Jewish Chronicle, Levy briefly reviewed representations of Jewish characters in English fiction and found them sorely inadequate. Even Eliot’s treatment of modern Jews in Daniel Deronda, otherwise lauded in the Anglo-Jewish press, is found wanting. Although Levy commends the author’s “sincere and respectful attempt . . . to portray the features of modern Judaism,” she concludes: “But which of us will not acknowledge with a sigh, that the noble spirit which conceived Mirah, Daniel and Ezra, was more royal than the king? . . . As a novel treating of modern Jews, Daniel Deronda cannot be regarded as a success.”66

We find echoes of this opinion in Reuben Sachs when cousin Leo remarks: “I have always been touched at the immense good faith with which George Eliot carried out that elaborate misconception of hers” (238).

Levy objected to the idealized treatment of the main Jewish characters in Eliot’s novel, possibly realizing that Eliot’s idolization of Mirah in particular might make it actually difficult for some readers to empathize with this character. She might have perceived that as an unexpected consequence of the narrative torture of Gwendolen in Daniel Deronda, the reader develops by the end of the novel sympathy for this gentle woman.
while remaining rather lukewarm toward the narratively favored Mirah. It is possible that Levy became aware of this effect on readers and decided to experiment with Eliot’s strategy of “character mistreatment” in her representation of Judith, although, it should be added here, her narrator never becomes entirely unsympathetic toward Judith.

REUBEN SACHS AS AN ANGLO-JEWISH NEW WOMAN NOVEL

There is much in Judith’s story that echoes Gwendolen’s. Both women characters are introduced as recognized local beauties from impoverished families. They both harbor romantic feelings for prominent young Jewish men they admire, who, however, refuse to propose to them. And both women’s economic hardship drives them to marry foolish and dull but wealthy gentile (although Lee-Harrison is formally a convert) men they hold in disdain. The narrative irony applied by Levy in her treatment of Judith also reminds one of Eliot’s handling of Gwendolen’s story, although the ironies of fate Eliot’s narrative prepares for her spirited heroine are much harsher than the subtler ones faced by the submissive Judith.

“The spoiled child” Gwendolen is introduced in Daniel Deronda as a woman who is generally admired for her beauty and who is unaware of her own provinciality and overconfident about her accomplishments. Until the end of the novel, Eliot’s narrator treats “poor Gwendolen” with much condescension, and the narrative teaches her lesson after lesson (presumably in order to provide this gentile woman with the kind of self-formatting sorrow with which the experience of belonging to a despised people had furnished Mirah), gradually “quell[ing] her resistant spirit.” Not only does Eliot’s text surprise her heroine with some ruthless ironies of fate, but the narrator is also harshly patronizing and disparaging toward Gwendolen. Some of the remarks Levy’s narrator makes concerning Judith would remind the reader of a subtler version of Eliot’s condescending narrator. For instance, “poor Judith” is described in Levy’s novel as “this thoroughgoing Philistine, this conservative ingrain” (211) or, on another occasion, as “this touchingly ignorant and limited creature” (230). Her soul is “clannish, exclusive, conservative” (269), and her outlook on life “of the narrowest” (210). But while Judith’s story and the humbling ironies of her fate are reminiscent of Gwendolen, her character differs from Eliot’s spirited heroine. Judith is more accepting of a woman’s place in traditional marriage, less openly condescending in her treatment of others, and entirely unambitious in her assessment of her own value on the marriage market.
Indeed, except for her unsystematic and provincial education and narrow mind (which remind one so strongly of Gwendolen), her character shares submissiveness as its main feature with Mirah. Deronda’s approving words, which so irritate Gwendolen, that Mirah “seems capable of submitting to anything when it takes the form of duty” (Eliot, 494) could be also applied to Judith, of whom Reuben thinks in one of his reveries, “so sweet, so teachable!” (Levy, 241).

By representing her Mirah-like (although less flat) heroine as receiving a Gwendolen-like tragic blow (from Levy’s version of Deronda) and as being generally maltreated by the Jewish community, Levy effectively censures Mirah’s naïve compliance with (and Eliot’s narrator’s overt acceptance of) the sexual double standard in Judaism. In a conversation about women’s place in Judaism, Mirah responds characteristically to her gentile friend’s question whether it seems “quite right to [her] that the women should sit behind rails in a gallery apart,” with “Yes, I never thought of anything else” (410). Although Eliot does lend a resonant and unforgettable voice (in the character of Deronda’s mother) to a Jewish woman artist’s objections to the stifling expectations on Jewish womanhood, overtly the narrative wants to favor the compliant Mirah, who asks Mordecai to teach her “to be a good Jewess” (643). Her feminine submissiveness and uncritical loyalty to what she recognizes as the traditions of her people are narratively rewarded by her marriage to Deronda, the most desirable male in Eliot’s novel.

Not so in Levy’s book. Regardless of how “sweet and teachable” Judith is, how deserving she seems, Levy’s Jewish community has no noble Deronda for her. And the man who occupies Deronda’s position here (in terms of being presented as the most desirable male character in Levy’s book) is encouraged by the community to abandon her for his own professional ambitions. Being—unlike the (initially) haughty and arrogant Gwendolen—virtually a “good woman,” a “good Jewess,” the discursive mistreatment of Judith seems unwarranted and consequently impresses the reader even more than Eliot’s narrative abuse of her gentle heroine. Presenting an utterly conventional and yet maltreated and wretched heroine, Levy’s novel flies in the face of those who would want to argue that traditional life choices would guarantee a Jewish woman’s fulfillment and happiness. While Levy does not foreground an emancipated woman character in Reuben Sachs, the story of Judith seems narrated from the position of an educated fin-de-siècle Jewish woman devastatingly critical of the Anglo-Jewry’s patriarchy, and thus it represents an important contribution to the New Woman literary tradition.
Not only can Judith and Reuben’s tragic relationship be read as a revision of Mirah and Deronda’s story from a perspective critical of Jewish patriarchy, but Levy’s representation of married Jewish women would also question the value of a husband, whether Jewish or gentile, as a “reward” (as he is conventionally used in the pre–New Woman domestic fiction). Here Levy’s fiction becomes congruous with the censure of matrimony in her New Woman poetry. None of the characters of wives in Reuben Sachs seem particularly happy and content. Instead, most of them appear disappointed, subdued, and exhausted. Even Judith’s mother, who married a noble Jewish intellectual reminiscent of Deronda, is disappointed with her life of poverty to which the union plunged her, although she does at least love her husband. The situation is worse for that majority of women in Levy’s Anglo-Jewish world whose marriages are financially motivated. Thus while her twenty-something daughter Rose, still single, is a beaming, healthy, confident, fashion-conscious woman full of energy, Aunt Ada’s wifehood and motherhood has, it is suggested, prematurely worn her out: “[Her] long, oval face was of a deep, unwholesome, sallow tinge; and from its haggard gloom looked out two dark, restless, miserable eyes; the eyes of a creature in pain. Her dress was rich but carelessly worn, and about her whole person was an air of neglect” (202). Her own misery, however, does not keep Aunt Ada from encouraging her niece to accept Lee-Harrison whom Judith despises. And even Rose advises her cousin to submit and do as she is told: “We all have to marry the men we don’t care for . . . I am not sure that it is not best in the end” (279).

But Judith’s marriage does not bear out Rose’s remark; it is obviously not “best in the end.” Already at her synagogue wedding, the reader’s attention is deliberately drawn to an “expression of something like terror” that appears for the first time in Judith’s “wide-open eyes” (286). And only three months into the marriage, the air of neglect characteristic of her subdued, spiritless aunt has settled down on Judith herself. Ironically, it is the viewpoint of Esther (the frequent object of Judith’s scorn) that is born out. The married women’s faraway gaze, self-neglect, and dreamy inattention to the outside world seem aptly illustrated by Ester’s favorite phrase that “marriage is an opiate” (284).

But if marriage is an opiate, spinsterhood, as it is portrayed by Levy, does not present a more desirable option to Jewish women. The novel’s “old spinster,” Rebecca, spends her life taking care of her father’s household, a life characterized as less than enviable: “She was unmarried, and hated the position with the frank hatred of the women of her race, for
whom it is a peculiarly unenviable one” (213). The narrative does not treat Rebecca’s story in more detail, but in her 1886 article for *The Jewish Chronicle*, “Middle-Class Jewish Women of To-Day,” Levy explains that if a Jewish woman “fails” to marry, “the parental authority [becomes] strained to the utmost verge.”70 The article illuminates many points Reuben Sachs would later make about the Anglo-Jewish community’s stifling patriarchy. The middle-class Jewish woman—to an even larger degree than her gentile counterpart, the essay maintains—“is taught to look upon marriage as the only satisfactory termination of her career” (525).

Judith has obviously learned her lesson well, as the narrative observes about her that “this woman, with her beauty, her intelligence, her power of feeling, saw herself merely as one of a vast crowd of girls awaiting their promotion by marriage” (209). Despite the narrator’s disparagement of Judith’s narrow mind on other occasions, here her intelligence is acknowledged, and the text proceeds to suggest that it is the provincial, sheltered, and perfunctory sort of education her community recognizes as sufficient for its women that stands in the way of her intellectual growth:

. . . as for Judith Quixano, and for many women placed as she, it is difficult to conceive a training, an existence, more curiously limited, more completely provincial than hers. Her outlook on life was of the narrowest; of the world, of London, of society beyond her own set, it may be said that she had seen nothing as first hand; had looked at it all, not with her own eyes, but with the eyes of Reuben Sachs. (210)

Reuben has been directing Judith’s reading ever since she was a girl, and the few books she owns (and which have instilled in Judith disdain for “any strong feeling that had not its foundations in material interests,” 269) had all been given to her by him. They are all works of instruction—historical essays and political lives—exactly the sort of books Grand would approve of for her New Woman as presumably instilling logical, rational kind of reasoning. Interestingly, Levy’s heroine—reminiscent of John Stuart Mill in his 1873 *Autobiography*—finds this kind of literature unhelpful during her emotional crisis. Similar to Mill—and gesturing back to Levy’s vindication of the passionate in her “minor poet” writings—Judith turns to the more affective literature (specifically, Swinburne’s poetry) which she had previously held in disdain, and she is finally moved to cathartic tears. By thus linking Mill’s famous account of his “irremediable wretchedness”71 and her own heroine’s emotional crisis, Levy suggests the
severity of the trauma that an abandonment of her by a man she loves can produce in a woman who had never been encouraged to think of herself as an independent being.

The first lesson Mill learned from his experience, he tells us, was about the “importance of poetry and art as instruments of human culture” (294). And Judith’s experience with her cathartic reading of Swinburne’s poetry corroborates Mill’s words. The more general conclusion Mill draws from his experience is the necessity of maintaining “a due balance among the faculties” (293)—of cultivating and nourishing not only the rational and abstract but also the emotional part of one’s self. The training of Levy’s heroine has obviously fallen short of this ideal of balanced education, a failure blamed in the novel on Judith’s community’s disregard for its women’s intellectual and emotional needs. It is this disregard that makes Levy’s heroine deride women’s opinions and also makes her more vulnerable to the haphazard and one-sided instruction Reuben provides to her. The only opinions held high by Judith’s community (as she has internalized) are men’s, and it is only through men that women can hope to gain any kind of intellectual stimulation.

Mill decides to draw his own conclusions from his life experiences, and, regardless of what others have been telling him, he accepts his feelings as an essential part of himself. As a result, his depression is cured and he can say: “I was no longer hopeless: I was not a stock or a stone” (292). Judith similarly acknowledges the weight of her emotions as she is confronted with them and as they are validated to her when reading Swinburne’s poetry: “Then there was, after all, something to be said for feelings which had not their basis in material relationships. They were not mere phantasmagoria conjured up by silly people, by sentimental people, by women. Clever men, men of distinction, recognized them, treated them as of paramount importance” (269). She had been confronted with an uncontrolled gush of passion once before, in the novel’s perhaps most poetically narrated episode, in which Reuben finally sacrifices their love for his political ambitions. In this highly sexually charged episode, Reuben first symbolically deflowers Judith, unpinning the chrysanthemums from her bodice. “I am going to commit a theft,” he says, while she “yielded, passive, rapt, as his fingers fumbled with the gold pin” (258). However, hearing the newspaper boy announcing the death of the conservative MP in whose shoes he has been awaiting to step, the ambitious Reuben remembers himself, drops the flowers, and, with “the look of a man who has escaped a great danger” (259) on his face, leaves Judith. Following the chrysanthemum episode, Judith is overwhelmed with “a sudden flood of passion, of
longing, of desolation” (262) as she simultaneously finally acknowledges her love for Reuben and faces his rejection of it.

In a fashion reminiscent of much nineteenth-century women’s writings (one thinks of Anne and Charlotte Brontë, or Mary E. Coleridge), Judith is confronted with this emotional side of herself in her mirror reflection. And this emotion-ridden image of her is—also in Victorian women writings’ tradition—recognized by Levy’s narrative as the most authentic part of Judith’s self:

Opposite was a mirror . . . and suddenly Judith caught sight of her own reflected face with its wild eyes and flushed cheeks; her face which was usually so calm.

Calm? Had she ever been calm, save with the false calmness which narcotic drugs bestow? She was frightened of herself, of her own daring, of the wild, strange thoughts and feelings which struggled for mastery within her. There is nothing more terrible, more tragic than this ignorance of a woman of her own nature, her own possibilities, her own passions. (262)

Unfortunately, unlike Mill, Judith has never learned to think independently of her mentor, and she has internalized Reuben’s contempt for “the emotional female brain” (278) too deeply. While the recognition and expression of her feelings bring her a momentary relief, she remains foolishly terrified of what others would think of her if they saw her crying over poetry. She remembers the “secret contempt and astonishment” with which she regarded Esther “dissolved in tears over her favourite poets” (270). She is alarmed that she “would grow in time to be like Esther, undignified, unreserved” (270). She stubbornly refuses to learn from her cousin, the woman whom the narrative identifies as the one person who “had perhaps a clearer view of Judith’s state of mind than any one else” (283). That Judith suffers (she turns into a “figure of stone,” 292) as a consequence of her rejection of the poetic and the emotional represented in the novel by Esther suggests that the narrative sides here with this overall more unconventional and interesting, though only minor, woman character.

In *Reuben Sachs* Levy thus returns to her earlier theme of validating the poetics of the passionate and subjective and expands it to promote a model of Jewish subjectivity that would be centered on the reaffirmation of one’s feelings and senses rather than on self-discipline dictated by materialistic needs. When applied specifically to the female gender, Levy’s narrative censures and rejects the ideal of ascetic, self-denying femininity, which
Judith is forced to embody with such fatal consequences. The model of passionate and self-realized Jewish femaleness that Levy seems to be proposing in this text allies her writing with George Egerton's creed of sensual, uninhibited womanhood, although the ascetic pressures that each of these two New Woman authors viewed themselves as resisting seem to have been coming from slightly different directions. Egerton and the other gentile New Woman writers (as well as their heroines) examined in this study saw themselves as responding mostly to the evolutionary narrative's directive that English women be the guards of the purity of their “imperial race” (and either embraced or rejected this directive). The disciplining pressures that seem to have been the most difficult for Levy’s Anglo-Jewish heroine to disregard were the pressures coming from within her community, which dictated that she suppress her sensuousness and her desires for the objective of bettering the overall material position of the upper-middle-class Anglo-Jewry within the English nation. As the character of Esther (and also Leo, in the case of men) suggests, opening one’s senses to the affect of subjective passionate poetry might be one way of resisting being turned into a “figure of stone.” Levy’s “minor poetics” thus can be viewed here as taking on quite a major function of assisting in the late-Victorian subject’s struggle to resist the various forms of bourgeois technologies of disciplining power.

REUBEN SACHS AND THE VICTORIAN CONVERSIONIST TRADITION

While Esther Kohnthal is merely a minor character in Reuben Sachs, her words most often provide a glimpse of the author’s own face, and she (along with cousin Leo, a Cambridge student) is the critic and the satyr in Levy’s book. Unlike Judith, she has an independent spirit and expresses her insightful and often biting observations openly. But then Esther is, in her own words, “the biggest heiress and the ugliest woman in all Bayswater” (204). She is generally found physically undesirable by men, and consequently they do not feel impelled to bend her mind to their liking. Also, as an only child, apparently motherless, and with her rich father shut in a madhouse, Esther seems to be in control of her own intellectual development. That Esther’s openly critical, independent, and passionate intellect grows from such an unusual combination of circumstances suggests how exceptional her case is.
I agree with Rochelson that Esther's is the most overtly feminist voice in the book. And her social position as a Jewish woman provokes in her passionate hate, suggested in her revised version of the orthodox Jewish men's misogynist prayer, which she designed for herself. Observing Judith being tortured by Reuben's sudden intentional inattention, Esther tells her cousin: "When I was a little girl . . . I wrote in my prayer-book: 'Cursed art Thou, O Lord my God, Who hast had the cruelty to make me a woman.' And I have gone on saying that prayer all my life—the only one" (265). As Michael Ragussis has pointed out, the original prayer, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord my God, who hast not made me a woman," spoken by orthodox Jewish men, was frequently cited by Protestant conversionist texts which, throughout the Victorian period, targeted the Anglo-Jewish community. According to Ragussis, the conversionists focused their efforts especially on the Jewish woman, whose presumed docility made her (they believed) an easy target for Christian proselytism. They claimed that women were particularly oppressed members of the Jewish community, and they cited the prayer to give weight to their claim. It could be argued that by targeting misogynist ideas and practices in Judaism with the purpose of claiming superiority of Christianity over Hebrew theology, the English conversionist literary tradition aided in placing feminism and Judaism in tension. The proselytizers' employment of the prayer to censure Jewish men's misogyny would have made its use in Anglo-Jewish feminists' texts tricky because it might have been read as the women's corroboration with the Protestant denunciation of Judaism.

Levy does cite the original prayer in her novel, but—in a move typical of her writings—she immediately undercuts its significance for actual Jewish women's lives, thus curtailing the potential conversionist readers' appropriation of her text for their purposes. She quotes the prayer as being spoken by (Reuben's sister) Adelaide's orthodox husband, Montague Cohen, who is first described as being "proud, Heaven knows why, of his personal appearance, his mental qualities, and his sex." The narrative then proceeds:

"Blessed art Thou, O Lord my God, who hast not made me a woman." No prayer goes up from the synagogue with greater fervour than this.

This fact notwithstanding, it must be acknowledged that, save in the one matter of religious observation, Montague Cohen was led by the nose by his wife, whose intelligence and vitality far exceeded his own. Borne along in her wake, he passed his life . . . following patiently and faithfully wherever the restless energetic Adelaide led. (214)
In this way, Levy to some extent weakens the link between her own critique of Jewish patriarchy and that of the conversionist literature, although Esther’s later invocation of the prayer might have perhaps again rekindled that link in the eyes of some readers.

Another sign that Levy was not aligning herself with the proselytizing voices is the character of Judith’s father, and also the figure of her husband, Lee-Harrison. In his discussion of Victorian conversionist novels, Michael Galchinsky has pointed to their narrative paradigm, adopted in an exaggerated way from Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, of depicting a tyrannical materialistic Jewish father and his repressed spiritual daughter, eventually saved by a Christian hero. Levy’s already cited article “The Jew in Fiction” demonstrates that she was well aware of, and dismissed, this tradition. “Rebecca of York,” she asserted, “with her hopeless love for the Gentile knight, and Isaac of York, divided, like Shylock, between his ducats and his daughter, remain to day the typical Hebrews of fiction” (13). Galchinsky’s reading of nineteenth-century Anglo-Jewish women’s novels underscores their conscious transformation of the father-daughter paradigm they encountered in the conversionist texts. Jewish women novelists retain the tyrannical father-figure (which enables them to express their own censure of the stifling patriarchy in Orthodox Judaism), but their heroine, instead of marrying a Christian hero, is united with a more tolerant Jewish man.

Levy’s own narrative pattern is independent of her Anglo-Jewish predecessors and is to a great extent directed by her reading of Eliot. But it does show signs of being the author’s response to, and rejection of, the plot formula characteristic of the conversionist novels. Judith’s father, rather than being a materialistic tyrant, is one of the few idealist characters in the book, and his presence is always soothing to Judith. And Lee-Harrison, whom the reader is encouraged to see as gentle despite his veneer of Judaism, is the exact opposite of the Christian hero in conversionist novels who would save the Jewish bride from paternal abuse. True, similar to the Jewish women in the proselytizing tradition, Judith’s marriage to Lee-Harrison will diminish (Levy’s text suggests) her ties with her community. But contrary to the conversionist novels, Judith’s marriage far from saves or liberates her. Instead, it is depicted as having accelerated the process of her alteration into an “automatic woman” (290), a “figure of stone” (292). And rather than happily turning away from “her people,” as she would do in the conversionist tradition, the union stirs in Judith a strong longing for them: “A sudden longing for the old faces, the old ties and associations came over her as she stood there; a strange fit of home-sickness, an inrush-
ing sense of exile. Her people—oh, her people!—to be back once more among them!” (289).

The novel portrays Lee-Harrison as an uninteresting, complacent fool who remains an insignificant figure in his wife’s emotional life. The only purpose he serves in Judith’s story is reproductive—Judith, the omniscient narrator tells the reader, is pregnant. And the child—who will likely be viewed as Jewish by the Jewish matrilineal community—will stir feelings and emotions in Judith (the narrative predicts) that her husband will never be able to inspire in his wife of stone. Might it be that with her child, Judith will be able to recreate the links with “her people” that she feels she has lost? This kind of conclusion for Levy’s novel would certainly frustrate the Victorian proselytizers’ hopes.

Having undergone a series of prior conversions to other religions or sects before his most recent one to Judaism (as he himself says, he “has a taste for religion,” 205), the character of Lee-Harrison is a particularly obvious response on Levy’s part to the Victorian proselytizing efforts. In that he is often depicted in the novel as a gentile onlooker observing (with much ethnographic interest and no comprehension whatsoever) the Sachs family’s Jewish customs, one is also tempted to see in him Levy’s caricature of her own Victorian Christian reader’s approach to the “Jewish theme” of her book. When reading of Lee-Harrison’s interest in “the Jewish character” and his shock at “finding us so little like the people in Daniel Deronda” (238), one cannot help suspecting Levy of mocking here not only this “howling swell,” this “intelligent fool” (205, 227) but perhaps also her own Christian reader’s expectations.

Levy prepares a treat of irony for her gentile fool and her gentile reader alike when Lee-Harrison is invited to spend the Day of Atonement with the Sachses. If Bertie, or Levy’s reader, expected a scene akin to the Cohen family’s solemn and dignified Sabbath dinner in Daniel Deronda—at which even the little girl Adelaide Rebekah strives to “make a suitable appearance” (448)—he would be in for a disappointment. Except for the family patriarch Solomon Sachs and the orthodox branch of the family, the Samuel Sachs (considered by the rest of the Sachs a “family joke”), there is no attempt at dignity at the Atonement dinner depicted in Levy’s narrative. Rose giggles hysterically, Leo and Esther look bored, and even Montague Cohen (otherwise quite orthodox) yawns during the family prayer. Levy here consciously distinguishes her young Anglo-Jewish generation from Eliot’s, suggesting that their identity and sense of self are shaped by much more in their surrounding culture than just the Hebrew religion. Arriving at the dinner “ready to be impressed by every thing and
every one he saw” (231), Bertie ends up staring and wondering: “Bertie
stared and Bertie wondered. Needless to state, he was completely out of
 touched with these people” (236). And so would feel a reader coming to
Levy’s book with misconstrued expectations based on a prior reading of
Eliot’s novel.

There is no doubt that Levy recognized in Daniel Deronda’s emphasis
on the Hebrew religion Eliot’s own response to the conversionist literary
tradition. But while she herself wrote her book at least partly in response
to the same tradition’s efforts at changing her people by changing their
religion, she refused to allow these efforts to make her overemphasize the
part she saw religion playing in the fin-de-siècle Anglo-Jewish identity. “It
is no good to pretend that our religion remains a vital source among the
cultivated and thoughtful Jews of today. Of course it has been modified, as
we ourselves have been modified, by the influence of western thought and
western morality” (238), Reuben articulates Levy’s point here. And for
once, the narrative seems to bear his words out.

THE COLONIAL IN REUBEN SACHS AND “COHEN OF TRINITY”

In her rejection of Eliot’s representation of modern Jews’ ambitions and
desires, Levy also depicted her characters as being indifferent toward the
idea of Zionism. Not much is known about how Levy herself regarded the
project of the Jewish resettlement in Palestine, which—in response to the
increasing European anti-Semitism and sustained by the contemporary
dominant European view of Arabs as inferior and irrelevant—had gained
momentum by the 1880s. Levy’s family affiliation with Asher Myers, the
editor of the influential Jewish Chronicle between 1878 and 1902 and a
friend of Amy’s father, was likely a relevant influence. Under the leader-
ship of Myers, the paper informed its readers about the increasing activi-
ties of the Zionist movement, while at the same time “open[ning] its
columns to Jewish anti-Zionists.”76 As David Cesarani has pointed out,
Myers himself, while he appreciated that Zionism was an understandable
response to the growing anti-Semitic sentiment in Europe, did not
endorse the scheme to establish a Jewish state in Palestine and instead
argued that “the battle against antisemitism [sic] must be fought in
Europe, not in Asia.”77

Levy’s 1888 translation of the poem “Jerusalem” (from a German trans-
lation of the Hebrew original), in which the eleventh-century Jewish poet
and philosopher Jehudah Halevi expresses his longing for the “city of the
world, most chastely fair” (405), demonstrates that she was aware of the strong feelings Jerusalem and Palestine could stir in the Jewish people. In *Reuben Sachs*, however, she chose to represent the idea that the Anglo-Jewry should leave Britain, their home, for the Middle East as preposterous. Hearing of Lee-Harrison’s disappointment over the Anglo-Jewish community’s failure to be like Eliot’s characters, Esther cries disapprovingly and sarcastically: “Did he expect to see our boxes in the hall, ready packed and labeled *Palestine*?” (238).

While being only a marginal episode in Levy’s book, this narrative choice seems significant in light of Edward Said’s reading of Eliot’s enthusiastic support for Mordecai’s mission. Foregrounding the usually disregarded losses that the enterprise of Zionism meant for the Palestinian natives, Said examines the historical and cultural circumstances that gave rise to the Zionist movement, exposing it as a reproduction of nineteenth-century European colonialism. “There is an unmistakable coincidence,” he argues, “between the experiences of Arab Palestinians at the hands of Zionism and the experiences of those black, yellow, and brown people who were described as inferior and subhuman by nineteenth-century imperialists.” He uses the example of Eliot to point out how prevalent the European indifference to how Zionism would affect the natives of Palestine was even among Europe’s “vanguard liberals.”

Returning to Levy, her dismissal of the idea of Jewish resettlement in the Middle East as absurd is congruous with the book’s deprecating attitude toward colonialism in general. All of the novel’s references (however brief and marginal) to various forms of foreign land appropriation represent it as a foolish practice not worth a reasonable person’s time. In the first of these remarks, already mentioned in this essay, the narrator dispatches Reuben’s brother to an “obscure colony,” caricaturing the popular British tradition of dispensing with younger sons by sending them off overseas. Another character with colonial experience in the book is Bertie Lee-Harrison. Significantly, Levy has Bertie narrate his adventures in Asia Minor just as Reuben comes to see Judith for the first time after her engagement. While Judith appears to listen amiably to her foolish fiancé’s account, her attention is really entirely absorbed by Reuben’s presence. Bertie’s blabber about Asia Minor is perceived by Judith and the reader as a sort of annoying background noise emanating from a self-absorbed and insignificant source, thus leaving us with the impression of colonial adventures as both uninteresting and entirely irrelevant.

It would be, however, misleading to argue that Levy’s dismissal of colonial practices and Zionism in particular was inspired by the author’s con-
sideration for the contemporary inhabitants of Palestine and that Levy's Jewish novel is more consciously sensitive toward the Palestinian natives than was Eliot's book. Commenting on *Daniel Deronda*, Said underscored the "total absence of any thought about the actual inhabitants of . . . Palestine" in the narrative. Where Eliot's Mordecai makes some insensitive, even racist, remarks about the contemporary occupants of Palestine, Levy's book fails to mention them altogether. The skeptical light cast on the question of Zion through *Reuben Sachs*, while standing in clear contrast to the idealism propelling Eliot's rendition of the same, does not include in its motivations any unambiguous concern on the author's part for the people then already inhabiting Palestine. Similarly, in *Reuben Sachs*’s above-mentioned dismissal of other ventures in foreign lands, the narrative complaint is of the irrelevance of such ventures as distractions from pressing issues (such as the corrupt materialistic values or the oppressive conditions for women) at home. Thus any attempt to attribute a full-blown anti-colonial consciousness to the narrative of *Reuben Sachs* is mitigated by the persistently absent Other. Still, Levy’s adoption of skepticism where Eliot opts for fantasy’s indulgency appears an advantageous alternative. Her focus on the problems and challenges of the politics of home as not readily resolved by a change of place does guard against ethnocentrist dominance. Dismissing the idea of Jewish resettlement in the Middle East and endorsing instead those in the Anglo-Jewish community who would insist on Britain as their home, Levy avoids allowing her characters to fall into what Said defines as the role of "colonial oppressors."

Besides the overt references to the exploration of overseas territories, there are other ways in which the colonial theme crops up in Levy’s fiction. Her representation of the relationship between Jews and gentiles in both *Reuben Sachs* and the 1889 short story “Cohen of Trinity”—whose Jewish characters desperately seek the approval of the English aristocracy—is reminiscent of the Hegelian master-slave narrative as applied by Frantz Fanon to the dynamics of power between the colonialist and the colonized:

At the foundation of Hegelian dialectic [Fanon writes] there is an absolute reciprocity which must be emphasized. It is in the degree to which I go beyond my own immediate being that I apprehend the existence of the other as a natural and more than natural reality. If I close the circuit, if I prevent the accomplishment of movement in two directions, I keep the other within himself. Ultimately, I deprive him even of this being-for-itself.83
In Levy's novel, the Jewish desire for recognition from English aristocracy remains futile. Appreciating the detrimental effects this nonreciprocal relationship might have on her community's sense of self, Levy represents (and passionately rejects) the hunger of her Jewish characters for approval by the gentile world in terms of their voluntary surrender of their right for self-determination.

Not only the overall unfavorably represented Reuben's sister Adelaide but also Reuben and Leo are depicted as bending over in their efforts to be noticed by otherwise minor characters of Lee-Harrison's cousins—Lord Norwood and Lady Geraldine. Their desire to gain the gentiles' approval is here portrayed as ludicrous, as both Norwood and his sister are depicted as uninteresting, average characters, undeserving of being looked up to. That Lady Geraldine ironically has "not the faintest idea of having inspired [Leo] with hopeless passion" (248) symbolizes the disparity between Levy's Anglo-Jewry's obsession with the English aristocratic society's approval and that society's self-assured obliviousness of these efforts. It never seems to occur to the Norwoods that they should look for recognition outside their own circle. Their privileged position in Victorian society, signaled by this autonomy, translates into their self-confidence and self-determination.

In "Cohen of Trinity," the admiration of the Cambridge prodigy Cohen for Lord Norwood, a more arrogant and snobbish version of the same character from Reuben Sachs, also remains un-reciprocated, even after he publishes his brilliant "half poem, half essay, wholly unclassifiable" (483) masterpiece. His exclusion from the circle of Cambridge gentiles is represented in the narrative as a source of Cohen's ultimately fatal (he kills himself) dissatisfaction. Reminiscent of Reuben and Leo in Reuben Sachs, but much more conspicuously, Cohen's place in relation to Lord Norwood resembles the position of the colonized subject (as defined by Fanon) in that the Jewish man's actions appear entirely dictated by his desire to be recognized by Norwood, and his self-image is constructed in relation to the English aristocrat. "They shall know, they shall understand, they shall feel what I am," he explains his motives for writing his masterpiece (485). The Englishman's sense of self, on the other hand, remains free of being impacted by the Jew. Lord Norwood is not impressed by the book. "It was clever," the narrator summarizes the aristocrat's comments, "but the book repelled him, just as the man, poor fellow, had always repelled him. The subject did not seem to interest him" (484). Through his continuing indifference to Cohen's efforts, Norwood ensures that his upper-class Christian
identity remains self-contained and uncontaminated by the mind pronounced by him lower and uninteresting. The Hegelian master refuses to grant his recognition to Cohen and maintains his own superior position by resisting the “slave’s” desire for approval. Norwood has decided that Cohen is a clever but repellant man, and whatever the Jew might do, however brilliant he might be, he is unable to change this dehumanized image of himself in the mirror held up to him in the Anglo culture by the Norwoods. “Nothing can alter the relations of things—their permanent, essential relations,” the defeated Cohen articulates the lesson his story has taught him.

The message of the significance of self-determination for the health of a community underscored in Levy’s texts seems to have been the author’s direct response to the contemporary Jewish critics’ tendency to assess Anglo-Jewish literature (including Reuben Sachs) through the lens of how a text’s representation of Anglo-Jewry might look to the gentile reader. As Bryan Cheyette has highlighted, the Anglo-Jewish press was at the fin de siècle still preoccupied with portraying Jews “as particularly moral in character so that they could be considered ‘deserving’ of emancipation.”84 The Anglo-Jewry’s obsession with how they appear to the gentile world is exposed in Levy’s narratives as working to justify the Christian community’s image of itself as superior. If the likes of Leo and Cohen continue to abdicate their right for self-determination by looking for approval from the likes of the Norwoods, they will continue, Levy suggests, to build the grounds for the gentiles’ position of privilege.

The pitiful character of “little Leuniger” in “Cohen of Trinity” indicates how unequivocal Levy’s rejection had become by this point of that part of Anglo-Jewry which was willing to give up its sense of identity for what it believed the Christians would wish it to be, and which pressured authors such as Levy to misrepresent the Anglo-Jewish community accordingly. The one Jewish character who has been “accepted” into the Norwood coterie, “little Leuniger,” has managed this by “playing the fiddle” (481) and serving as a novelty for the group. The apparent conditions of Leuniger’s inclusion suggest that in order to become accepted by the English Christian community, the Jew should be willing to appear unthreatening (“little”) and mediocre (“playing the fiddle”). And while Cohen himself was obsessed with the Norwood coterie’s approval, the role of an unintimidating Jew, apparently, was not the kind of pretense the brilliant Jew was open to performing.

“Cohen of Trinity” (1889) bears some notable similarities to Levy’s earlier short story, “Socratics in the Strand” (1884). The comparison between the two stories highlights Levy’s growing preoccupation—already con-
spicuous in *Reuben Sachs*—with the propensity of the Victorian scientific discourse to racialize the Jews and represent them as irrevocably degenerate. This propensity was becoming particularly persistent in the late 1880s, following the exodus of thousands of persecuted East European Jews to Britain. Increasingly, the pseudoscientific theories of the presumed Jewish inferiority were being used to validate English anti-Semitic sentiments.

“Cohen” and “Socratics” both feature gifted Cambridge men whose talents raise high expectations which, for reasons in both cases somehow linked to a flaw in their “inner machinery,” they cannot fulfill. While the earlier story’s exploration of the question of biological determinism is still race-neutral, Cohen of Trinity is Jewish, and the language Levy uses to describe him is clearly racialized. Indeed, almost all of the stereotypes of Jewish physiognomy highlighted in the Victorian evolutionary discourse as presumed signs of the Jewish racial difference can be found in the gentile narrator’s description of Cohen. Commenting on his “curious figure: slight, ungainly; shoulders in the ears,” the hostile narrator doesn’t fail to mention the Jewish man’s “full, prominent lips, full, prominent eyes, and the curved beak of the nose with its restless nostrils” (479). And Cohen’s pronounced nervousness draws on the notion, which by the 1880s had become canonical in medical circles, of congenital predisposition among Jews to psychopathology.

Whereas in *Reuben Sachs* Levy was able to see beyond these stereotypes and satirize and even laugh at them, there is nothing light or comical about “Cohen of Trinity,” and the irony of this piece—gloomy, ominous, existential—is of a different kind than the ironic mode in Levy’s novel. In *Reuben Sachs*, Levy experimented with the ironic voice as a means of trivializing and destabilizing the uneven power relations between the Jews and the gentiles inscribed into the anti-Semitic evolutionary discourse. The author, it seems, still believed that “the relations of things” (in Cohen’s words) were not “permanent and essential,” and she tried to use irony to displace the dominant image of the English gentiles as the “imperial race.” Her masterpiece uses the language of the hegemonic scientific discourse as its “said” while at the same time relativizing the authority of that same discourse by means of conveying—through the “unsaid”—an attitude of contempt toward it. Irony, however, as Levy would learn from the reception of her masterpiece, is a tricky device that has been known to misfire. To some extent validating her Jewish critics’ concerns, most gentile reviewers seem to have missed Levy’s ironies in *Reuben Sachs*. Viewing the text as a realistic portrayal of the Anglo-Jewish community, the Victorian reviewers taught Levy the hard lesson that (in Hutcheon’s words) it is ultimately “the
reader who decides whether an utterance is ironic [for him or her] or not,” and this process of attributing irony “occurs regardless of the intentions of the ironist.” If the readers did not ascribe an ironic meaning to Reuben Sachs—if they did not consider the text’s “unsaid” in interpreting the book—the only thing left was the text’s “said.” In such a reading, the novel would not be a destabilizing commentary on, but a simple endorsement of, anti-Semitic stereotypes. Is it possible that with the power of irony to develop a sort of “counterdiscourse” diminished in this way, Levy herself felt that—as Cohen would state it—there was now no means left for her to destabilize and alter “the relations of things” and that they were indeed “permanent, essential”?

As Cohen’s story shares much with the life story of his creator, who committed suicide shortly after publishing this piece and not long after the publication of her misinterpreted masterpiece, it gives indications of the kinds of questioning doubts that the anti-Semitic discourse of biological determinism, along with persistent cultural biases about gender, raised for Levy concerning herself as a Jewish intellectual woman. In her biography of Levy, Beckman refers to her vulnerability to clinical depression, to the possibility the early death of one of her brothers was caused by syphilis, to Levy’s suspicion that the advancing loss of her hearing and the episodes of mental breakdowns were signs of her own progressing syphilis and that she was sinking to madness9 as some of the motives behind Levy’s decision to end her own life. One is here reminded of Robins’ battle with the late-Victorian medical discourse that would doom her to insanity and of her exploration (in her texts) of the theme of suicide as one possible way for her characters to elude the scenarios prescribed by the pseudoscientific laws. But where Robins seems to have used her writing cathartically, writing the option of suicide out of her own life story, Levy appears to have written in “Cohen of Trinity” the script for her own life’s ending. Finding herself doubly targeted by the Victorian discourse of degeneration as a Jew and as a woman, and also doubly misinterpreted by both gentile and Jewish critics whose recognition she seems to have craved, the pressures placed on Levy, it seems, proved too great.

CONCLUSION

An educated, childless, single Jewish woman with a history of mental malady, a woman possibly harboring homosexual feelings, Levy could not have been more targeted by biological determinism of the anti-Semitic,
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misogynist evolutionary narrative, and her reasons for trying to develop a rhetoric that would trivialize its impact could hardly have been more overdetermined. Levy experimented with two main rhetorical strategies for that purpose—the poetic and the ironic. In her most interesting work, she used these literary modes in the direction of destabilizing the evolutionary discourse’s directive of ascetic femininity as well as its myth of the English as the superior “imperial race.” Apparently disinterested in the future of the British colonial project, Levy also used irony in her work to trivialize the British discourse of empire.

That Levy’s critics did not always ascribe an ironic meaning where the author seems to have intended takes us back to some of the questions concerning discursive ambiguity that have been raised in the chapter on Robins. What devices are available to authors writing from a subject position marginalized in their culture, who wish both to be heard by the dominant discourse and to criticize and destabilize it? Irony would indeed appear an ideal device in this respect. Its repetition of the language of the dominant discourse makes sure that the ironist will be listened to, while the exaggerated use of that language exposes the absurdities of the discourse and undermines its authority. However, the reviews of Levy’s Reuben Sachs, as much as Victorian male critics’ misinterpretations of Robins’ Ibsen roles, seem to suggest some impracticability of ambiguity and irony for a woman artist working in a culture where it will be a male (and gentile) critic/reviewer who will stamp the final meaning on her work.

Still, how do we explain that despite the critics’ reading of Levy’s masterpiece as anti-Semitic and the reviewers’ interpretation of Robins’ Ibsen heroines as “hysteric,” both of these women’s work attracted vast and enthusiastic crowds of exactly those whom the critics identified as maltreated by these artists? Unless we cynically ascribe that enthusiasm to the masochism of fin-de-siècle emancipated women and Jews, the option remains open that—because they brought to their reading of these texts life experiences very different from those of the male critics—the women readers’ interpretation was also radically different and that they were perhaps able to appreciate the subversive ambiguities inscribed into the work of these two New Women.