

# NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Weisman, Karen A. *Singing in a Foreign Land: Anglo-Jewish Poetry, 1812—1847*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 264 pp.

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<1>In the decades leading up to the emancipation of the Jews in Britain (1858), Jewish writers used English literary forms to explore their cultural and religious difference while also claiming a place within a national literary tradition. This is the landscape in which Karen A. Weisman identifies an Anglo-Jewish “long Romanticism” in which Jewish poets engaged Romantic lyrics, ethics, and settings to ironize the possibility of their national and artistic belonging (2). As Weisman deftly shows, these works were caught between affirming Jewish particularity and a kind of measured universality. Participation in an English literary tradition was, for the poets examined here – Emma Lyon, Hyman Hurwitz, Celia and Marion Moss, and Grace Aguilar – to speak in the language and poetic forms which forbade their inclusion, both within the Romantic canon and also within the very landscape it revered.

<2>The chapter on Lyon (1788-1870) is particularly welcome given that she has not been the subject of much recent scholarly attention. Lyon’s slender oeuvre consists of a single volume of poetry which also contains her original translations and paraphrases of selected psalms. Her father Samuel Lyon was a teacher of Hebrew at Oxford, Cambridge, and Eton, and although Emma Lyon received limited formal education, her training in Hebrew was apparently extremely good. Weisman notes a telling disjunction in authorial voice between Lyon’s poetry and her psalms. The volume was dedicated to Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales, granddaughter of George III and second in line to the throne, but this “quivering address” to royal patronage resonates differently in the two parts of the book (23). The speaker of the poems, who tremulously attempts the elegy and the ode, bears little resemblance to the translator with mastery of the psalms’ Hebrew language and Jewish meaning, qualities which position her as “the emender of David himself” (23). Lyon’s translations engage with those of contemporary Christian Hebraists and are thus, for Weisman, assertions of her authenticity as a Jew and as a poet, as well as of the cultural authority that it is impossible for her to assert in English literary forms.

<3>Weisman’s treatment of Hyman Hurwitz (c. 1770-1844) similarly emphasizes scholarship in Hebrew language, practices of translation, and addresses to the royal family as a means of claiming Jewish affiliation in an Anglican polity. An important difference though is that Hurwitz’s works discussed here were written in Hebrew and translated, likely in every instance, by his friend and supporter Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Weisman thus makes the striking claim that Hebrew poetry written in England belongs to an English literary tradition. Hurwitz, a Polish emigrant to England who became the first

Professor of Hebrew at University College, London in 1828, wrote a dirge on the occasion of Princess Charlotte's early death in 1817 (the very same who inspired Lyon's dedication), an event that occasioned immense national mourning. When George III died in 1820, Hurwitz again produced an elegy in Hebrew. Both these works were chanted in the Great Synagogue, Aldgate and printed with an English translation on facing pages. Weisman reproduces this effect by including some Hebrew verses alongside Coleridge's translations to show that while they differ in some respects, both emphasize the universality of suffering. Hurwitz promoted Hebrew literacy for Jews as, perhaps surprisingly, a route to greater acculturation in England. His aim, as Weisman shows, was that Jews should retain their linguistic distinctiveness and greater sensitivity to biblical allusions, while also demonstrating a capacity to affectively express loyalty to the Crown *as Jews*.

<4>Like Lyon, Celia (1819-73) and Marion (1821-1907) Moss, sisters from Portsmouth, co-authored one volume of poetry while still in their teens (*Early Efforts*, in 1839). Unlike Lyon, they went on to write several works of Jewish history. Nor were they educated in Hebrew. Indeed, their father, who had instilled in them a love of English poetry, discouraged them severely from ever presuming to write their own. Weisman foregrounds, and perhaps overdetermines, the father's hostility as foundational to the sisters' process of asserting the authority of their poetic voices as Jewish women in a Christian country. Reading their works against Coleridge, Wordsworth, and others, Weisman traces how they negotiate the metaphoric significance of a pastoral landscape in which they also figure themselves as exiles. Poems such as "The Jewish Girl's Song" and "The Massacre of the Jews at York" show that the landscape does not in all cases carry a consensual meaning, and also register a literary narrative of English Jewish history, albeit one that hinges on rejection. Indeed, as Weisman rightly notes, "singing in exile" is an ancient biblical and diasporic trope in Jewish expression (157). In this way, the Moss sisters' poetry – presented as issuing from a single voice – hovers irresolvably between seeking full participation in the expressive resources of the country of their birth and a self-conscious account of exile that is dismayed by historic violence toward the Jews.

<5>Grace Aguilar (1816-47) is now the best known of this book's subjects, and Weisman adds to current scholarship by positioning Aguilar's explorations of landscape and exile within a nascent Anglo-Jewish Romanticism as well as alongside her canonical poetic influences. An extended reading of "Dialogue Stanzas: Composed for, and Repeated by, Two Dear Little Animated Girls, at a Family Celebration of the Festival of Purim" alongside its template, Wordsworth's "Expostulation and Reply," convincingly shows that reading Jewish history means, for Aguilar's youthful interlocutors, that a retreat from book learning to the landscape cannot easily be effected, nor is it free from dangers. Similarly, "Song of the Spanish Jews, During their 'Golden Age'" (part of Aguilar's extensive engagement with her Sephardic lineage), recalls that tolerance can turn to hostility. Both poems emphasize the abiding possibilities of exile and exclusion. These anxieties are notable, as elsewhere Aguilar made an impassioned case for the expansion of civil liberties for the Jews in England. Indeed, the "Sabbath Thoughts" poems exemplify Aguilar's simultaneous affirmation of Jewish particularity alongside claims of Judaism's compatibility with Protestantism. As Weisman points out, the Sabbath is a

fitting, if fraught, subject, a “common reference point for Jews and Christians even as it is the marker of obvious difference” (214). After all, the Jewish Sabbath occurs on Saturday, a temporal difference that occasioned no small public controversy with respect to labour and trade as well as ritual observance amid the wider debates on Sunday Sabbath observance underway during the 1840s.

<6>*Singing in a Foreign Land* convincingly demonstrates that Jewish poets during the early decades of the nineteenth century shared a self-reflexive Romanticism. As the inheritors of Romantic expression, they nonetheless experienced, and relentlessly drew attention to, their exclusion from the bucolic settings and nationalist narratives central to the tradition to which they sought admission. In asserting their self-representation and cultural authority in a language, landscape, and country from which they also felt alienated, these poets created a new Anglo-Jewish subjectivity as much as they advanced any claims to political and social amelioration. Weisman’s argument regarding the poets’ subjectivity would be much bolstered by clarifying what is meant by modes such as “decidedly Jewish [...] sensibility” (134) or “recognizably Jewish representation” (178). While the book teases out diverse nuances in poetic expression, it often assumes a generic Jewishness without articulating its theological or cultural underpinnings. The study is framed by a discussion of the later-Victorian poet Amy Levy (1861-1889), whose affinity for the city marks a turning away from the Romantic preoccupation with nature. As an avatar of her restlessness, cosmopolitan London stands in for Levy’s social, sexual, and religious alienation rather than acting as a site from which she is excluded. As this coda seems to show, however, regardless of poetic form the contradictions of Anglo-Jewish identity persist in nineteenth-century poetry.