THE JEWESS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH LITERARY CULTURE
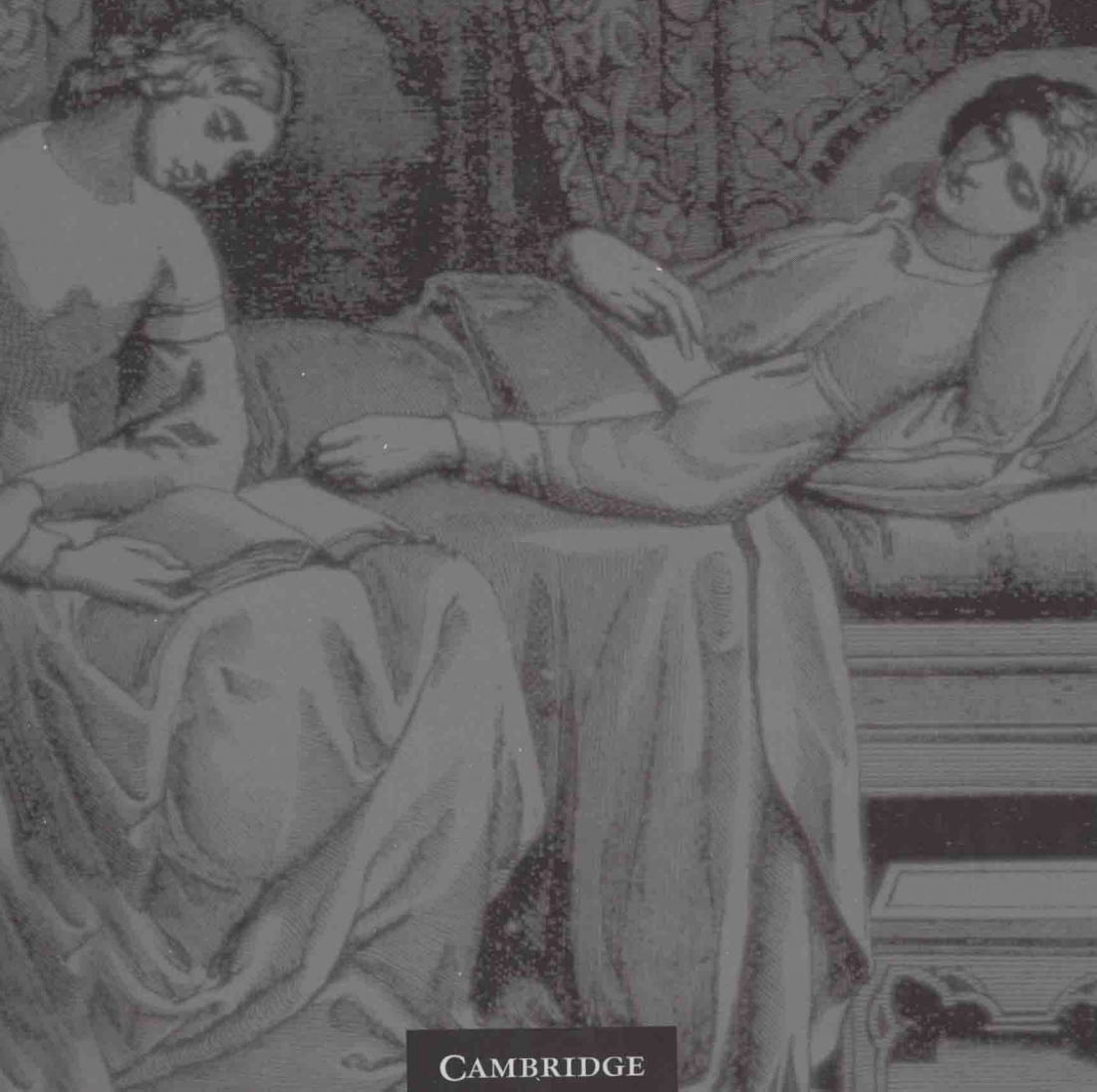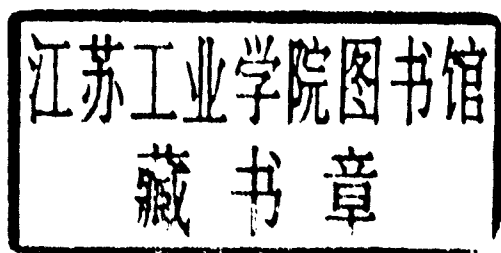
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NADIA VALMAN

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[Hers] is a type that sometimes, just now and again, can be so pathetically noble and beautiful in a woman, so suggestive of chastity and the most passionate love combined . . . love that implies all the big practical obligations and responsibilities of human life, that the mere term 'Jewess' (and especially its French equivalent) brings to my mind some vague, mysterious, exotically poetic image of all I love best in woman.

George du Maurier, *The Martian* (1897)

There is in the words 'a beautiful Jewess' a very special sexual signification, one quite different from that contained in the words 'beautiful Rumanian,' 'beautiful Greek,' or 'beautiful American,' for example. This phrase carries an aura of rape and massacre. The 'beautiful Jewess' is she whom the Cossacks under the czars dragged by her hair through the streets of her burning village. And the special works which are given over to accounts of flagellation reserve a place of honor for the Jewess. But it is not necessary to look into esoteric literature . . . the Jewess has a well-defined function in even the most serious novels.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946)

In her, like us, there clashed, contending powers,
Germany, France, Christ, Moses, Athens, Rome.
The strife, the mixture in her soul, are ours

Matthew Arnold, 'Rachel III' (1867)

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Completing *The Jewess* coincided with a wondrous new project, my son Orlando Valman. Orlando's life has uncannily matched the chronology

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Introduction: the Jewess question

At the heart of the most celebrated Victorian novel of Jewish identity is the untold story of a Jewess. In the teeming London streets where Daniel Deronda searches for the relatives of his rescued waif Mirah Lapidoth, he comes across the obsequious pawnbroker Ezra Cohen and his exuberant family and hears mention of Ezra's lost, unnamed sister. The affair is clouded in reticence and embarrassment: both Deronda and the Cohens are reluctant to say or hear more. However, the need to resolve this enigma is obviated: Deronda discovers that Mirah's brother is not the unctuous Ezra but the mystic Mordecai Cohen. And Mordecai reprimands Deronda for his intrusiveness: 'There is a family sorrow . . . There is a daughter and a sister who will never be restored as Mirah is.'[1] The absence in the Cohen family is not, after all, Mirah, whose 'restor[ation]' anticipates the national redemption of the Jews signalled at the end of the novel. In contrast, the fate of the anonymous daughter who might have been her remains forever undiscovered. Is she, as the conventions of the Victorian novel would suggest, dishonoured? Or is she, as the Jewish context of the Cohen family might also suggest, converted to Christianity, and thus equally alienated from them? The two possibilities point to two contrary themes in the representation of the Jewess evident not only in Eliot's text but also more generally in nineteenth-century culture: on the one hand, the dangerous carnality of the Jewish woman, and, on the other, her exceptional spirituality and amenability to restoration, conversion or radical assimilation. These two shadowy and in some ways overlapping stories underlie the complex and ambivalent figure of the Jewess in Eliot's novel, and form the subject of this study.

Unspeaking, unmentionable and unredeemed, the Cohen daughter is a unique absence in Eliot's narrative. But the difficult questions she raises about both Jewish and female destinies persistently haunt nineteenth-century literature. In the figure of the Jewess converge the period's deepest and most intensely debated controversies over religion, sexuality, race and

nationality. From the medieval ballad of the Jew's daughter who seduces a young Christian boy in order to murder him, to Shakespeare's uncertain apostate Jessica, the Jewess held a marginal place in English literary history. In the nineteenth century, however, she became a literary preoccupation. Here, I trace the trajectory of her story, from its rise in Romantic and Evangelical writing through myriad rewritings in both popular and high literature. Throughout the nineteenth century, I will argue, the figure of the Jewess marked out the axes of difference through which English Protestant identity was imagined.

The Jewess continued to compel and provoke writers precisely because she threw into disarray clear categories of difference. This theme was articulated with striking persistence in the staging and revival throughout the nineteenth century of Eugène Scribe's *La Juive* (The Jewess), the libretto to the French grand opera by Fromental Halévy. Influenced by British literary sources, translated into English in 1835 and revived in the 1850s and at the turn of the century in London, *The Jewess* was a paradigmatic dramatisation of the key motifs that recur in literary representations of the Jewish woman.[2] Composed by a Jew and written by a gentile, the opera suggested the extent to which a complex response to Jewishness was shared by both. Its parable of religious intolerance, originating in the Enlightenment polemic of its French original, could also speak feelingly to liberal, Protestant audiences in nineteenth-century England. The drama is set in medieval Switzerland at the time of the Council of Constance, the notorious convocation that condemned and burnt reformists as heretics, and of popular anti-Jewish violence. Here, the married Prince Leopold falls in love with the heroine Rachel, and courts her, claiming to be a Jew. When Rachel discovers this deception she denounces Leopold, and both incur the death penalty since their interfaith liaison contravenes the law. But the Prince's wife pleads with Rachel, who retracts her charge – by which he, though not she, will be saved. In an inquisitorial scene the Cardinal offers to save the Jewess if her father converts to Christianity, but the father refuses, threatening revenge if he loses his daughter. As Rachel is put to death in a furnace, her father reveals that she is not a Jewess, but the daughter of the Cardinal himself.

The martyrdom of Rachel points not only to the irresistible erotic appeal of the 'Jewess' and her superior, self-sacrificing love, but also to the fatal religious rigidity of both the Jewish and the Christian men. The plot also suggests, however, the profound uncertainty surrounding the identity of the Jewess herself. The tragic force – and liberal message – of *La Juive* turns on the fact that the truth of Rachel's self is invisible to her lover, her adoptive

father, her biological father, and even to herself: the Jewess is an empty signifier onto which fantasies of desire or vengeance are arbitrarily projected. The unsettling ontological implications of this obfuscation of the nature of Jewishness are even more starkly expressed in Miriam Rooth, Henry James's *fin-de-siècle* Jewish actress, described in *The Tragic Muse* (1890) as a 'blank'.[3] Unlike the figure of the Jew, whose physique is indelibly marked by the sign of his religious or racial difference, the body of the Jewess is unreadable.

Turning critical attention to the Jewess in nineteenth-century literature requires a revision of received accounts of antisemitic discourse. The intellectual arsenal of European antisemitism, writes Todd M. Endelman, can be reduced to 'a handful of accusations about Jewish character and behavior: Jews are malevolent, aggressive, sinister, self-seeking, avaricious, destructive, socially clannish, spiritually retrograde, physically disagreeable, and sexually overcharged'.[4] The Jew in such descriptions is implicitly masculine, and perceptions of Jews are frequently seen as projections of anxieties about masculinity.[5] Cultural theorists, from Sartre to Fanon to Lyotard to Sander Gilman have similarly assumed the masculinity of the Jewish subject.[6] Gilman's important study of the ideological implications of Jewish physiological difference, *The Jew's Body*, focuses unapologetically on representations of 'the male Jew, the body with the circumcised penis – an image crucial to the very understanding of the Western image of the Jew at least since the advent of Christianity'.[7] The scant attention that has been paid to the image of the Jewish woman has been limited to masculinised representations of the Jewess and thus has assimilated her to the same set of concerns.[8] Hence, critical focus on the masculine Jew(ess) in even the most theoretically audacious work in Jewish cultural studies has, in turn, tended to reproduce predictable narratives of the ubiquity and suppleness of antisemitic discourse.[9] Jonathan Freedman, however, has recently directed readers to the covert 'libidinal engagement' of Victorian writers with the figure of the Jew.[10] Indeed, as my study will argue, in English culture of this period Jews were imagined as much in terms of desire and pity as fear and loathing. Rather than a denigrated masculinised figure, the Jewess was often, in fact, an idealised representation of femininity. And it is the image of the beautiful or spiritual Jewess, whose Judaism is *not* permanently inscribed on her body, that reveals most dramatically the ambiguous and dynamic character of responses to Jews in England.

English literary representations of the Jewess overlap with, but are distinct from, similar discursive formations in continental Europe. In particular, the figure of the Jewess often seems drawn from the same set of fears

and fantasies that generated nineteenth-century Orientalism. Indeed, just as the scholarly and literary apparatus of Orientalism helped to naturalise Christian domination of colonised peoples, it equally provided a means of knowledge and power over Semites at home. Like the nineteenth-century 'Oriental', the Jewess was often seen as childlike, malleable and in need of redemption, while Jewish culture, like that of the 'Orient', was despotic, primitive and unchanging.[11] The Jewess herself was ubiquitously conflated with the Oriental woman, and recognised by her stylised sensual beauty: her large dark eyes, abundant hair and languid expression.[12] Scholarly studies of the figure of the *belle juive* in French and German Romantic literature – 'a combination of erotic stimulus and pogrom', in Florian Krobb's words – have interpreted images of her exotic allure and stories of her tragic self-sacrifice as an allegory justifying the political subjugation or social exclusion of Jews.[13] In these texts, the Jewish woman, like the Oriental, served to sustain a foundational dichotomy between Occidental and Semitic. In English culture, however, the Jewess was never so entirely Other.

Historians have long recognised the particular complexity of English attitudes towards the Jews, and this has given rise to conflicting historiographies of Anglo-Jewry.[14] Viewed from a comparative European perspective, nineteenth-century England afforded increasing rights, respect and comforts to Jews.[15] Seen within a narrower national context, on the other hand, the coercive force of emancipation, the precarious nature of liberalism and the persistence of antisemitism in British culture come into focus.[16] These contrary accounts of the Anglo-Jewish experience are reflected in the tantalisingly ambiguous presence of 'the Jew' in literary texts. Exposing an ongoing oscillation between respect and repulsion, texts open up to reveal both hostile *and* appealing images of Jews, figuratively expelling *and* incorporating them simultaneously. Impossible to describe simply as 'anti-semitic' or 'philosemitic', such texts may be considered instead as examples of what Bryan Cheyette terms 'semitic discourse' – an ambivalent form of representation in which the meaning of 'the Jew' is not fixed.[17] The complex ambivalence of semitic discourse, I will argue here, is most fully revealed in the opposition between 'Jew' and 'Jewess'.

Within the broader scope of European culture, the overdetermination of 'the Jews' has been located in both theological and philosophical contexts. The ambivalent identity ascribed to the Jews, in Zygmunt Bauman's account, derives from their role in the post-antiquity world as the alter ego of Christianity, marking its spatial and temporal boundaries. As the origin of Christian theology and also its imagined opponent, Judaism is both foundational and antithetical to Christian cultures; Jews are 'inassimilable, yet

indispensable'.[18] In psychoanalytic terms, the 'Jew' is uncanny, a reminder of what is familiar though alienated through repression – or, as Susan Shapiro has argued, a ghostly, 'living corpse', anomalous in the modern world.[19] Judaism and the Jews also became the limit case for Enlightenment thinking about the scope of secular modernity's claim to universality. Enlightenment philosophers were unable to transcend the exceptionalism that structured Christian thinking on Judaism, and relied on the figure of Judaism as reason's defining Other.[20] The Hegelian tradition, meanwhile, took up the Christian construction of Judaism as blindly fixated on the law, and regarded Jews as incapable of self-reflection, particularist rather than universal, and therefore outside the scope of the modern project. But if this view considered the Jews incapable of autonomy, they were regarded by the left Hegelians, conversely, as *too* autonomous (too modern) in their radical disidentification with national cultures.[21] That the Jews could be seen as threatening both for their cosmopolitanism and for their traditionalism suggests how crucially they figured in the definition and contestation of the boundaries of the modern nation. Indeed, Bauman and Kristeva have both theorised 'the Jew' as a disturber of borders, categories and systems.[22]

These contradictory terms frame the Jewish Question as it was argued over throughout Europe in the nineteenth century. In England, meanwhile, the political problem of the place of the particularist Jews in a liberal state, and the theological paradox of their inassimilability yet indispensability, were both vividly dramatised on the public stage of Parliament in the 1830s and 40s. In the wake of the political emancipation of Catholics and dissenting Protestants, Jews too began to campaign for the right to participate in government. In the public debates, 'reason' duelled with 'persecution' on behalf of 'liberty', while the traditions of the Christian state were defended with equal vehemence against the incursions of the unbeliever.[23] But an equally significant influence on nineteenth-century semitic discourse was the powerful cultural presence of Protestant Evangelicals, who accorded a uniquely privileged status to the Jews.[24] Reviving the ideology of seventeenth-century millennialism, British Evangelicals stressed not the rupture between Christianity and Judaism, but their identification with God's Chosen People and especially its Bible. The Evangelical novelist and editor Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, for example, was described by an Anglo-Jewish periodical as a 'devoted friend of Israel', and Jacob Franklin, its editor, accordingly addressed himself to Evangelical readers as 'your elder Brother'.[25] This affection, however, coincided with a severe critique of Judaism as archaic, law-bound and corrupt. Rapprochement

with Jews was sought, then, with a view to their conversion, which Evangelicals pursued with indefatigable vigour. Intent, in the words of William Wilberforce, on a thoroughgoing reform of 'the manners and morals of the nation', Evangelicals also saw the conversion of the Jews as a crucial step in hastening the Second Coming of Christ, and England, with its history of tolerance rather than persecution, had a special role to play in this project. The simultaneous idealisation and conversionary impulse of Evangelicals, however, was in structure very similar to that of emancipationists, who invariably regarded the extension of rights to Jews, like colonial subjects, as premised on their 'civil improvement' – their remoulding through state intervention into model modern citizens.[26]

The most nuanced recent work on the Jews in the history of England has insistently called attention to the discursive context in which Jewishness was debated. 'The English turned to Jewish questions to answer English ones', writes James Shapiro of the early modern period.[27] Focusing on the nineteenth century, David Feldman has argued that the Jewish emancipation debate was not simply a battle between 'reason' and 'intolerance' or 'modernity' and 'tradition' but the enunciation of competing accounts of the relationship among religion, state and nation. The constitutional challenge presented by the claim of professing Jews to enter Parliament meant that 'Jewish disabilities – whether to maintain, reform or abolish them – were inserted within the decisive conflicts of mid-nineteenth-century British politics'.[28] The contours of the nation itself were being fought over through public engagement in Jewish questions, and Jews participated in this dynamic process both passively and actively.

Nineteenth-century texts were constituted by the same contending forces, and often starkly fissured by them. Jews were caught up in the polemical crossfire that attended the Evangelical Revival and the struggle over parliamentary reform in the first half of the century, and the ascendancy of liberalism and its fragmentation in the latter half. Repeatedly, therefore, narratives that strain to contain or transcend forms of 'difference' mark their ideological ambit through the figure of the Jew. 'By encompassing the unruly "Jew" – an age-old outcast from history as well as Christian theology' argues Bryan Cheyette, '– the efficacy of a civilizing liberalism, or an all-controlling Imperialism, or a nationalizing socialism, could be established beyond all doubt.'[29] Indeed, the nineteenth century's key controversies about religion, race and nation, according to Michael Ragussis, were figured through the metaphor of conversion. The narrative of Jewish conversion, he shows, was pervasive in literary discourse, expressing not only hopes and fears about Jewish integration, but also accounts of the hybrid or

converted nature of Englishness itself. Rather than relying on the old criti-
cal paradigm of distinguishing 'antisemitic' and 'philosemitic' texts, Ragus-
sis sets Evangelical conversionist literature (often avowedly philosemitic)
against the 'revisionist' accounts of conversion in Maria Edgeworth, Wal-
ter Scott, Benjamin Disraeli, Matthew Arnold and George Eliot, which
'critiqued the English national character by subjecting it to a moral reeval-
uation on the basis of English attitudes toward the Jews'. The 'ideology
of (Jewish) conversion', he argues, stands behind numerous variants of the
Jewish question 'at the center of a profound crisis in nineteenth-century
English national identity'.[30]

In this study, I also read images of Jews as ciphers for broader cultural
and political debates. But what I explore here is how the fractures in these
debates are revealed in gendered representations. Contrary constructions
of English national identity, I will argue, were typically articulated not
through opposing conversionist and 'revisionist' texts, but deeply embed-
ded *within* both. Crucially, they were symbolised through the rhetorical
figure of gender. The structural ambivalence at the core of both Enlight-
enment and Evangelical conceptions of Judaism is dramatically revealed
in the bifurcation of Jewish figures across gender. If, in these traditions
of thought, Judaism was both critiqued as archaic and legalistic and ide-
alised for its direct link to biblical origins, in fictional texts this ambiva-
lence took the form of an ideological, aesthetic and temperamental battle
between the often elderly male Jew and the youthful, enquiring Jewess.
'The young Jewess', as Lionel Trilling noted in a 1930 study of Jews in
fiction, 'abhors the practices of her father.'[31] As the crux of narrative res-
olution, the Jewess embodied the theological and intellectual problem of
the Jews and enabled a range of possible responses to it. Characterised by
attractiveness and pathos, she was the vehicle of literary debate about the
Jews articulated not only through argument but also through affect. In
diametric contrast to her narrow, patriarchal and unfeeling Jewish family,
the Jewess personified the capability of Jews for enlightenment and self-
transformation. Moreover, as I will show, the same intellectual paradigms
of Judaism continued to inform later nineteenth-century representations
of Jews even as the terms of discussion shifted from religious confession to
the more secular language of biological race. If the Jew, still too modern or
too archaic, came to stand for the excesses of capitalism or a degenerative
atavism, the Jewess equally held the potential for cultural or racial regen-
eration. The figuring and refiguring of English national identity in reli-
gious, political or racial terms relied on images of Jews that were, above all,
gendered.

Jewish questions, moreover, were discursively intertwined with, or echoed, woman questions. Liberal arguments for the rights of Jews (as for colonial slaves) and for the rights of women, for example, deployed the same argumentative strategies. William Hazlitt's 1831 case for the emancipation of the Jews parallels that of Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).[32] For Wollstonecraft, the emphasis in feminine culture on beauty resulted in vanity and corruption; inattention to health and exercise produced excessive delicacy. Like the Jews, women are prone to vice only as the effect of an oppressive culture, and await redemption from it – an argument from custom that was to become a central theme in Victorian feminist ideology.[33] In Evangelical theology, meanwhile, Jews and women were subject to a structurally identical series of contradictions. The medieval exegetical tradition, Lisa Lampert argues, 'links the spiritual, masculine, and Christian and defines them in opposition to the carnal, feminine, and Jewish'.[34] Nineteenth-century Protestantism, however, reconfigured this nexus. Like Jews, women were both narrowly defined in Evangelical culture and deeply venerated as agents of millennial transformation. As Catherine Hall has shown, the fraught ambivalence of Evangelical discourse on gender was echoed in missionary writing on colonial slavery, which evinced a belief in spiritual equality as well as an assumption of white superiority.[35] Even more sharply though, Jews, like women, evoked the paradox in Evangelical ideology of exceptional religious potential and necessary social subordination.

The importance in the public debate about Jews of imagery and argument involving gender has been consistently neglected in scholarship. John Beddoe's *The Races of Britain* (1885), for example, cast Jews among the dark races characterised by 'patient industry and attachment to local and family ties'.[36] But if, in this way, racial theory frequently feminised Jews, a contrary strain of thinking set Judaism and women in opposition. Just as, from the Enlightenment onwards, Muslim gender relations, and particularly the image of the harem, came to constitute 'a metaphor for injustice in civil society and the state and arbitrary government',[37] the civility of the Jews was measured by the perceived status of women in Judaism. From Maria Edgeworth's *Harrington* (1817) and the Evangelicals of the 1830s, to the first-wave feminists of the 1890s, the mythic failure of Jews properly to reverence women was a cornerstone of discussion. Sarah Lewis's indignant demand, 'Can women be anything but Christians, when they hear the scornful thanksgiving of the Jew, that he was not born a woman?', was repeated throughout the century and served to assert the authority of