

‘Passionately Subjective’: Challenges to  
Identity in the Works of Amy Levy

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## Abstract

This thesis is a study of the work of Amy Levy, poet, novelist and essay writer who came to prominence in the 1880s and whose life was cut short by suicide in 1889. As a Jewish woman with literary and professional aspirations and with no apparent desire to marry, Levy's life challenged contemporary notions of gender, religion, race, and sexuality. She produced three novels, three collections of poetry, and numerous short stories and essays. I analyse Levy's works as literary products, literary criticisms, and as genealogies of late-Victorian identities. Levy's scholarly and creative writings reflect a keen awareness of literary and cultural movements, often prefiguring discussions regarding feminism and modernism which would not take place until after her death. I argue that her textual productions analyse the power relations at play in 1880s Britain: what actions and, indeed, subjects, are made possible and impossible by the contemporary field of representation. Levy's apparent interests in literary traditions and debates, genre, poetic convention and the representation of marginal lives and experiences all concern the intersections between discourse, power, and knowledge.

I begin with an examination of gender, class, and space, particularly public or semi-public space, in Levy's work. Her first novel, *The Romance of a Shop*, critiques conventional femininity through its inverse relationship between class and spatial mobility for its female characters. This is read alongside the 1888 article, 'Women and Club Life'. I then consider, with reference also to George Gissing's *The Odd Women*, how shifts in class and spatial mobility influence the trajectory of the romance plot. Finally, this chapter considers a range of Levy's lyric poetry, predominately from *A London-Plane Tree and Other Verse*, showing how the modern city and street are celebrated spaces, where the boundaries of identity can, if temporarily, be transcended.

Next, I go back to Levy's childhood and adolescence, reading a series of letters written by Levy to her sister Katie Levy and others. I read these letters queerly, resisting the imposition of assumed heterosexuality. Together with a selection of what I call Levy's "queer poetry", I argue that these are representations of same-sex desire. Building upon the models of identity formulated in Chapter One, I argue that Levy's representations of subjectivity are markedly queer: they refuse stability, escape recognition, and find fullest articulation in transience.

The final chapter considers Levy's most complex novel, *Reuben Sachs: A Sketch*. I examine its representations of Jewishness and gender and, importantly, its techniques of representation, revealing the novel's self-reflexivity. I show, together with Levy's writings in *The Jewish Chronicle* and elsewhere, that Levy actively writes back to a history of Jewish literary representation. Finally, reading the short story 'Cohen of Trinity', I observe Levy's most tragic representation of marginal identity and how representation and associated mis/recognition shape subjectivity. Amy Levy's work critically engages with the creation of identities and subjectivities, anticipating the disruptive cultural politics more commonly associated with the 1890s.

## Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and, where applicable, partner institutions responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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## Introduction

This thesis is a study of the work of Amy Levy, poet, novelist and essay writer who came to prominence in the 1880s and whose life was cut short by suicide in 1889. As a Jewish woman with literary and professional aspirations and no apparent desire to marry, Levy's life challenges contemporary ideas of gender, religion, race, and sexuality. Throughout her short career, Levy produced three novels, three collections of poetry, and numerous short stories and essays. She held acquaintance and friendships with such notable figures as Olive Schreiner, Vernon Lee, the Black sisters, Eleanor Marx, Oscar Wilde, Karl Pearson, and Grant Allen. Active in the 1880s intellectual culture of Bloomsbury, Levy's scholarly and creative writings reflect a keen awareness of literary and cultural movements, often prefiguring discussions regarding feminism and modernism which would not take place until after her death. While her scholarly works sometimes critiqued contemporary ideologies and representations, her creative works functioned as formal and thematic experiments in signification. Levy was acutely aware of the performative aspects of language, as is evidenced by her article on Jewish humour published in *The Jewish Chronicle* in 1886:

In these days, indeed, of slackening bonds, of growing carelessness as to long-cherished traditions; when the old order is changing and giving place to new with startling rapidity it is, perhaps, our sense of humour as much as anything else, which keeps alive the family feeling of the Jewish race. The old words, the old customs, are disappearing, soon to be forgotten by all save the students of such matters. There is no shutting our eyes to this fact. The trappings and the suits of our humour must vanish with the rest; but that is no reason why what is essential of it should not remain to us a heritage of the ages too precious to be lightly lost; a defence and a weapon wrought for us long ago by hands that ceased not from their labour. If we leave off saying *Shibboleth*, let us, at least, employ its equivalent in the purest University English. Not for all Aristophanes can we yield up our national free-masonry of wit; our family joke, our Jewish Humour. ('Jewish Humour' 524)

Here, Levy argues that the reiteration of phenomena, in this case a culturally-specific humour, is required for the continuing production of cultural Jewish belonging: ‘the family feeling of the Jewish race’. Though the vocabulary is different, Levy is deploying here an argument akin to Michel Foucault’s on power and Judith Butler’s on performativity: that subjects are created and performed through power and discourse. Like Mona Caird, whose article ‘Marriage’ (1888) declared that ‘the nature of women is the result of their circumstances’ (188), Levy is interested in the role of power in the constitution of subjects. This is precisely the focus of Foucault’s discussion concerning subjectivity, identity and power in ‘The Subject and Power’. Foucault theorised that:

[Power] operates on the field of possibilities in which the behavior of active subjects is able to inscribe itself. It is a set of actions on possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; it releases or contrives, makes more probable or less; in the extreme, it constrains or forbids absolutely, but it is always a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action.

A set of actions upon other actions. (‘The Subject’ 341)

In this thesis, I demonstrate that Levy’s works perform a type of Foucauldian exploration of subjectivity and identity. Her examinations of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, class, and sexuality are often attentive to both the productive and oppressive aspects of power. For instance, Foucault’s model of subjectification – the notion that subjects are created through the intersection of power and knowledge (i.e. discourse) – is reflected in the heroine of Levy’s novel *Reuben Sachs: A Sketch*. Judith is not a New Woman figure whose desires or aspirations are thwarted by society or narrative form; rather, Judith is unable to even realise desires beyond the possibility of marrying. The narrator observes that ‘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' (69). Judith's narrative failure is one of inability rather than oppression. Throughout much of her work, Levy is articulating or performing a Foucauldian 'struggle against the forms of subjection—against the submission of subjectivity' rather than merely struggling against 'forms of domination and exploitation' ('The Subject' 332).

This thesis analyses Levy's works as literary products, literary criticisms, and as genealogies of late-Victorian identities. I argue that her fictional and scholarly texts analyse the power relations at play in the late-nineteenth-century field of representations: what actions and, indeed, subjects, are made possible and impossible by the contemporary field of representation. Levy's apparent interests in literary traditions and debates, genre, poetic convention and the representation of marginal lives and experiences all concern the intersections between discourse, power and truth in a manner that could be said to anticipate Foucault. In investigating the power operating within these subjectifying intersections, Foucault observed that:

This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects. ('The Subject' 331)

Earlier in his career, Foucault specifically investigated the creation of certain types of subjects, notably criminals, medical subjects, insane subjects, and sexual subjects. This specificity allowed him to identify and analyse forms of power in their material effects. These subjects were produced in and through certain institutions and discourses, such as, for the criminal, the carceral institutions and the discourses of criminology and delinquency. For Foucault, the 'law of truth' determines the field of action, of possible actions upon actions, and it determines the possible field of representation and often

serves the ruling classes and ruling ideologies as it simultaneously creates both. The laws of truth Levy's work interrogates are discourses of race and ethnicity; religion, particularly Judaism and Catholicism; social and economic class; gender and sexuality. The institutions vary, from the Synagogue to marriage, but often Levy's focus is on perceived inequalities or injustices.

Levy also investigates how literary conventions and forms are in themselves productive and oppressive structures. In her early poetry, she uses the established poetic form of the Victorian dramatic monologue to "re-write" history with 'Xantippe', a poem from the perspective of Socrates' wife. In her first novel, *The Romance of a Shop*, she combines genres of realism and romance, critiquing the latter through the subversive deployment of its tropes. Her literary scholarship, notably her essay on James B.V. Thomson, reveals and examines the boundaries of literary representation, challenging the premise of literary realism and celebrating a more affective representational mode. Levy's journalism, whether concerned with either Anglo or Jewish cultures, analyses the intersections of the struggles against gendered discrimination and gendered subjection.

Amy Levy was born in 1861, the second of seven children, to Isabelle and Lewis Levy (Bernstein, 'Introduction' *Romance* 13). The middle-class Levy family resided at Clapham Road in what is now South Lambeth (Pullen 14). Levy's father and uncle had made money earlier in the century during the Australian gold rush, where they sold wares to miners in the Melbourne region (Beckman, *Amy Levy* 12). The family were members of the West London Synagogue in Upper Berkeley Street, a popular Reform Judaism synagogue. While it is difficult to clearly ascertain the Levy family's relationship to Judaism, it is clear from Levy's life that her family had progressive views in relation to women's education, and were not afraid to expose their

children to non-Jewish religion, secular culture and sociality. A letter written from Levy to her parents when she was a child and in the care of the family governess, Emily Pateman (Pullen 17), shows a young Levy describing a visit to St Peters' "old church" with Pateman while on holiday near Kent (Beckman, *Amy Levy* 215-6; Pullen 17). In the letter she transcribes a headstone's curious epitaph for her mother, and advises her father that he should be very interested in the church (Beckman, *Amy Levy* 215-6). Lewis Levy, her father, valued science and literature. Asked by a little Levy for her "Confessions Book", 'If not yourself, who would you be?', Lewis Levy replied 'Charles Darwin' (Beckman, *Amy Levy* 18). Amy Levy was also not the only Levy daughter to receive an unusually high level of education: Katie Levy was attending, at the age of twenty-one, the London Academy and Ella Levy attended North London Collegiate, a school founded in the 1850s for the provision of 'high-quality education for girls' (Beckman, *Amy Levy* 18).

As a young teenager in 1875, Levy won the "junior prize" in *Kind Words Magazine for Boys and Girls* for her review of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. That same year Levy published her first poem, 'The Ballade of Ida Grey' in feminist magazine *The Pelican*. Levy's feminist commitments would be further developed when, in 1876, she was sent to the progressive and secular Brighton High School for Girls, founded by Emily and Maria Shirreff five years earlier and managed during Levy's time by Miss Edith Creak (Bernstein, 'Introduction' *Romance* 14). The Brighton school was part of the Shirreffs' Girl's Public Day School Company; formed in 1871 to provide high-standard and rigorous secondary education for female students. In addition to a more conventional curriculum of geography, history, higher mathematics, French and German, Brighton offered female student studies in Latin — a significant requisite for classical studies and a subject traditionally denied to female

students (Beckman, *Amy Levy* 30). Letters written during her Brighton years and reproduced in Beckman's biography<sup>1</sup> reveal Levy's consideration of an unmarried, working life for herself (Letter 8 224) and romantic feelings for women (Letter 5 220; Letter 6 221-2; Letter 7 222; Letter 8 224), while also revealing the anti-Semitism she faced from her peers (Letter 9 225). It was during this time at Brighton that Levy wrote what is arguably her most highly regarded poem, 'Xantippe'.

In October of 1879 Levy enrolled at Newnham College, Cambridge, where she was the first Jewish student to attend (Bernstein, 'Introduction' *Reuben* 15). Women had been allowed to enrol in Cambridge for only ten years at this time, with the first women's college, Girton College, having opened in 1869 and Newnham itself in 1871. The anti-Semitism experienced at Brighton can be assumed to have continued into Cambridge, if Levy's creative writings are any indication ('Cohen of Trinity' from 1889 and the unpublished 'Leopold Leuniger: A Sketch'<sup>2</sup> are particularly relevant here). Though Levy left Cambridge after two years and never completed her studies, her literary output during this time was great. She published short stories in 1880, 'Euphemia: A Sketch in *Victoria Magazine*, Mrs. Pierrepont: A Sketch in Two Parts in *Temple Bar*, and her first collection of poetry in 1881, *Xantippe and Other Verse*. Letters from this period again recount romantic feelings for other women, with being helped by one such woman in gym class described as 'bliss' (Letter 11 229). After leaving Cambridge in 1881, Levy travelled the continent, and then when back in London she stayed at her family home in Bloomsbury (Beckman, *Amy Levy* 55, 75). In 1886 Levy met Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) in Florence where Lee was based (Beckman,

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Amy Levy's letters come from their publication in Linda Hunt Beckman's *Amy Levy: her Life and Letters*.

<sup>2</sup> All references to 'Leopold Leuniger: A Sketch' come from a manuscript copy obtained through the generosity of Linda Hunt Beckman. As Hunt Beckman transcribed and typed the manuscript herself, page numbers will not be given. The original manuscript copy is currently held in a private archive in London. No published version is currently available.

*Amy Levy* 254-5). Levy developed romantic feelings for Lee though they were never reciprocated (Letter 28 261; Goody 'Murder' 464; Beckman, *Amy Levy*; Newman 53, footnote 5). Becoming acquainted with Lee brought Levy into contact with new social circles, among them fellow artists and probable homosexuals (Beckman *Amy Levy* 132). Levy's relationship with Lee and her time spent with Florence were held dearly, as references to both are peppered throughout her late poetry.

During the same year, 1886, Levy published a collection of short articles for *The Jewish Chronicle*, addressing Jewish representation in literature, gender in London's middle-class Jewish communities, the role of humour in Jewish culture past and present, Jewish children and child-rearing, and an account of her experiences visiting a former Jewish ghetto in Florence. This collection of articles, which are discussed further in Chapter Three, illustrates Levy's complex and at times ambivalent relationship with Jewish culture and heritage. 'Middle-Class Jewish Women of To-Day' decries the narrow options available to women in Anglo-Jewish society and the pressure placed upon women to marry (and only marry), while 'Jewish Humour' reveals a deep love for and respect of Judaism, celebrating its uniqueness and resiliency. 'The Jew in Fiction' functions retrospectively as a critical companion text for what would become Levy's most famous and controversial novel, *Reuben Sachs: A Sketch* (1889), with its critique of one-dimensional villainous and idealised Jewish figures from nineteenth-century British fiction. Levy's final novel, *Miss Meredith*, was serialised in the *British Weekly* between April and June, 1889.

Amy Levy died in September of 1889 of charcoal inhalation at the age of twenty-seven in her family home. Depression had been a consistent presence in her life; increasing deafness and neuralgia may have been contributing factors in her death. The obituary written by Oscar Wilde and published in the third volume of *The Woman's*

*World* in 1890 attests to the respect and admiration shown towards Levy's literary works, particularly for their production from an author so young.

Falling into obscurity shortly after her death, Levy's work was brought back to critical attention in the 1980s by scholars profiling her as a Jewish woman writer; prominent among these works was Edward Wagenknecht's 1983 collection, *Daughters of the Covenant: Portraits of Six Jewish Women*. Wagenknecht surveys an impressive range of Levy's work, discussing all three novels, multiple short stories, scholarship, and dozens of her poems. He notes Levy's poetic interest in the city, nature, the arts (including literature and music), and the recurrent melancholy, which Wagenknecht frames as the condition and expression of a tortured romantic. Regarding the novels, he is attentive to plot, but has curiously little to say about their narration:

All are direct, simple, straightforward narratives, avoiding all unnecessary complications, and paying no heed to the sophisticated considerations of 'method' which were coming more and more into vogue. *Miss Meredith* is a first-person narrative by the name character; both the other novels employ a third person narrator. For a Victorian, Amy Levy exercises considerable constraint in the matter of direct authorial comment, and what does occur infrequently is not particularly intrusive. (60)

Wagenknecht here misses the self-conscious playfulness of *The Romance of a Shop* and the deep ambiguity of *Reuben Sachs*. As I explore in Chapter Three, the narration of *Reuben Sachs* is far more slippery than conventional omniscient narration and its fluidity complicates the novel's subject matter. Further, Wagenknecht uses the Jewish racialised descriptions in 'Cohen of Trinity' to support his reading of *Reuben Sachs* as hostile without mentioning that the latter has a clearly Gentile narrator. The ambiguity of the narration in *Reuben Sachs* is avoided in 'Cohen of Trinity', thus allowing the reader to witness the narrator's misreading of Cohen and of Jewish identity and culture more broadly. Bryan Cheyette's 1986 'From Apology to Revolt: Benjamin Farjeon,

Amy Levy and the Post-Emancipation Anglo-Jewish novel, 1880-1900' is another significant early piece of Levy scholarship. Cheyette identifies what he calls the 'apologetic tradition' of Anglo-Jewish literature. Dominant throughout the nineteenth-century, this tradition represented Jewish people as particularly moral and as holding values aligned with middle and upper class Anglican society. These novels functioned politically, representing Jewish people as "good citizens" in the decades prior to emancipation. By the 1880s, however, Cheyette notes a new "type" of representation inaugurated (he argues) by *Reuben Sachs*: the novel of revolt. These novels, in the post-emancipation landscape, were able to both promote and question Anglo Jewry's "public image" while often critiquing the culture's materialism and revealing how the apologetic tradition of conformity could oppress. By reading *Reuben Sachs* alongside contemporary novels and important intertexts such as George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, Cheyette conceptualises the "negative" Jewish representations in *Reuben Sachs* as a form of subversion, rather than (or not merely) as instances of what Sander Gilman has called 'Jewish self-hatred' (*Jewish* 1).

Though Wagenknecht and Cheyette acknowledges Levy's feminist interests and representations, it was not until 1990 that she was resituated as a New Woman novelist. In "'Neither pairs nor odd': Female community in late nineteenth-century London"<sup>3</sup>, Deborah Epstein Nord investigates Levy alongside Beatrice Webb and Margaret Harkness as examples of independent women whose "feminism" was deeply informed by their urban locations and identifications ('Neither Pairs'). In addition to a discussion of her poetry and first novel, *The Romance of a Shop*, Nord notes that *Reuben Sachs*, in its shift in attention from Reuben to Judith halfway through the book, also critiques

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<sup>3</sup> A later version of this article was included as a chapter in Nord's 1995 book, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* under the title "'Neither Pairs Nor Odd': Women, Urban Community, and Writing in the 1880s'.

middle-class womanhood ('Neither Pairs' 752). It is important to signal here that Nord's article historicises the 1880s specifically, and that Nord herself does not explicitly cast Levy as a New Woman writer. Nevertheless, in its broad discussion of Levy's work and life from a gendered perspective, the article has been instrumental in the common New Woman reading.

The most substantial body of Levy scholarship has been produced since the 1993 publication by Melvyn New, *The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy: 1861-1889*, which gave unprecedented access to a wealth of Levy's work that had, until this point, been mostly out of print for a century. New, like Wagenknecht, devotes ample space in his Introduction to Levy's poems, and though he is less critical of *Reuben Sachs* and more appreciative of its feminist ambitions than Wagenknecht, he, too, continues the tradition of reading *Reuben Sachs* as a realist novel. One of the first detailed explorations of the novel's feminist themes was published by Meri-Jane Rochelson in 1996.<sup>4</sup> She cites a number of contemporary review, demonstrating how the text's critical reception from the beginning has positioned it as a "Jewish novel", thereby foreclosing opportunities for feminist interpretations. Rochelson also analyses the novel's representation of the arts (particularly poetry) and its relationship to passion in some detail. She rightly points out that Judith's critical as well as emotional "awakening" occurs through experiences of passion, incited by love or poetry, and that tellingly, the character of Esther is unique for her love of the arts and for her feminist principles. I build upon this reading by situating the liberating potential of poetry and passions within the novel's larger interest in the politics and im/possibilities of marginal representation. Unlike Rochelson, I argue that the liberatory potential of passion stems

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<sup>4</sup> Though not the main argument of the article, Linda Hunt [later Beckman] is attentive to the gendered representations and demonstrates awareness of the feminist implications of *Reuben Sachs* in her 1994 article, 'Amy Levy and the "Jewish Novel": Representing Jewish Life in the Victorian Period'.



in part from its pre-discursive nature. Through love and poetry, Judith is able to feel what she is otherwise unable to know. Intense feeling is a strategy to circumvent the limits of contemporary discourse. Finally, I argue that while early scholars are highly attentive to thematics, most neglect to interrogate the formal aspects of the novel, particularly its ambiguous narrative style.

It is not until a series of works by Linda Hunt Beckman (previously Hunt) beginning in 1994 that the narrative techniques of Levy's prose are explored with nuance:

Aware that a writer's ability, including her own, to imagine the world and produce meaning is limited and defined by the belief-system which she receives from the systems of representation that the society makes available, Levy writes her Jewish novel in such a way that "truth" is hard to pin down. *Reuben Sachs* is a text whose stance toward the sector of Jewish society it seeks to represent is far from resolved. Epistemologically experimental, it lacks what Penny Boumelha, in a theoretical discussion of classic realism, calls 'a controlling "truth voice."'

Levy makes her novel polyphonic in the Bakhtinian sense by experimenting with narrative technique. It is important to note that the narrative voice functions inconsistently, sometimes calling attention to its omniscience and at other times undercutting its own authority. (Hunt 248)

Scholars since Beckman have increasingly acknowledged Levy's experimental narrative techniques and my approach to *Reuben Sachs* is indebted to Beckman's astute scholarship. Her analysis, too, of short stories 'Cohen of Trinity' (1889) and the unpublished 'Leopold Leuniger: A Sketch' greatly inform my readings ('Leaving'; *Amy Levy*; 'Amy Levy: Urban Poetry'). Beckman's contributions to Levy scholarship are greatest in relation to the texts mentioned above, though her biography, *Amy Levy: Her Life and Letters*, published in 2000, gathers important biographical information regarding Levy's childhood, education and travels. Significantly, the biography also reproduced several of Levy's personal letters which recount her feelings of same-sex desire during her school years. Levy's same-sex desire was previously acknowledged

by Nord, New, and Rochelson, and analysed to some degree by Francis and Joseph Bristow, but the publication of Levy's letters give the strongest biographical evidence of her queer sexuality to date.

The other significant piece of Levy scholarship from the 1990s is Cynthia Scheinberg's 1999 article, 'Canonizing the Jew: Amy Levy's Challenge to Victorian Poetic Identity', which explored how the Victorian poetic landscape was dependent on Christian epistemologies and universalism. Scheinberg's discussion of Matthew Arnold's often overlooked essay on Heine illuminates Levy's own ambivalent relationship to the academy and literary society. Scheinberg and later Bristow ('All Out of Tune') draw upon Levy's James Thomson essay to demonstrate her interest in, and valuing of, the passionate and particular, resisting an Arnoldian (and Christian) framework which praises and canonises the universal. Like Beckman, Scheinberg constructively reads *Reuben Sachs* alongside 'Cohen of Trinity', and argues that the unambiguously Gentile narrator of the latter was a strategic decision by Levy considering the vexed reception and possible misreadings caused by the former ('Canonizing' 181-2). Scheinberg's reading of Levy's work as acts of literary criticism in themselves stimulates and informs the central tenets of this thesis: that Levy's writings explore the boundaries and possibilities of literary representation and challenge these boundaries with varying levels of success.

It is, nevertheless, in these early analyses of Levy as a minority figure (as woman or Jew) where much scholarship has stayed. Though Amy Levy was not by period or, as I argue in this thesis, by style or concern, a New Woman writer, she was a woman Victorian writer and engaged with feminist ideas. My research, therefore, is made possible by a number of important contributions to literary and cultural studies concerning the New Woman of the late-Victorian period and women of the Victorian

period more generally. Numerous full length books have been written on the New Woman, including Gail Cunningham's *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel* (1978), followed by Ann Ardis's *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (1990), Elaine Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (1991), Sally Ledger's *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (1997), Ann Heilmann's *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism and New Woman Strategies: Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird* (2000 and 2004, respectively) and Iveta Jusová's *The New Woman and Empire* (2005). The New Woman has become a particular figure of scholarly interest in no small part due to the multiple, often contrary, guises she frequently adopts. As Ledger writes:

The New Woman of the *fin de siècle* had a multiple identity. She was, variously, a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, a woman poet; she was also often a fictional construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late nineteenth-century women's movement. (*The New Woman* 1)

An ongoing critical re-examination of women's writing from the nineteenth century also made the republication of Amy Levy, and this thesis, possible. In this regard, I build upon Elaine Showalter's ground-breaking *A Literature of Their Own and Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, Isobel Armstrong's work on Victorian poetry, Judith Walkowitz's *The City of Dreadful Night*, Lynda Nead's *Victorian Babylon*, Lee Holcombe's study of Victorian women's labour, *Victorian Ladies at Work*, Deborah Nord's *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City*, Deborah Parson's *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity*, and Martha Vicinus's *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women: 1850-1920*.

Further to engaging with scholarship of New Womanhood and Victorian feminism, I am interested in situating Amy Levy as a specifically modern, urban writer. Levy favoured urban settings in her prose, wrote of public institutions such as the British Museum and Women's Clubs, and took London as her muse in her final collection of poetry, *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse*; she directly signals in the latter volume's epigraph by Arthur Dobson: 'Mine is an urban muse, and bound / By some strange law to paven ground'. The last decade has seen a growth of interest in Levy's later poetry and in the formal and literary, rather than purely thematic aspects of her earlier poetry. Ana Parejo Vadillo, in her innovative and illuminating work, *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity*, observes that this final collection of Levy's poetry was likely to be the first dedicated to London (6). Levy's later poetics, as Alex Goody ('Passing') and Vadillo (*Women Poets*) among others have noted, present an urban aestheticism reminiscent of Charles Baudelaire, and anticipates the poetics of the 1890s and Modernism. Vadillo also shows the hitherto scholarly disregard of women poets in surveys and collections of late-Victorian urban aestheticism (*Women Poets* 5-7), a vast gap which her study importantly addresses. Significantly, and in helpful relation to Chapter One of this thesis, Vadillo situates the modern subject as not a rambler or stroller (as studies before her have), but as a passenger, investigating mechanised forms of urban mobility, such as the omnibus, underground, trams and trains, to reveal new ways of thinking about women and urban poetics (*Women Poets*). In the same year as Parejo Vadillo's book was published, Linda Hunt Beckman's 'Amy Levy: Urban Poetry, Poetic Innovation, and the Fin-de-Siècle Woman Poet' appeared. It gives attention to the modernist techniques of Levy's poetry, and her remarkably early adoption of modes, such as French symbolism, commonly believed not to have influenced English poetry until after Levy's death. Vadillo and

Beckman's analyses of Levy's adoption of remarkably modernist techniques informs my reading of Levy's works.

In the latter parts of the twentieth century, when minority writers were recuperated and brought back into literary consciousness, Levy's poetry and prose was rescued from obscurity, both as "Jewish writing" and "women's" or, even, "New Women's writing". In similar ways to which Levy has been reimagined as a *fin de siècle* writer and figure, she has been frequently, and problematically, cast as a New Woman. Many conceptions of the New Woman had their literary debut in Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* in 1883. Schreiner's novel is described as 'the most important prototype of the New Woman' (Ledger and Luckhurst 76). The term itself appears not to have been coined until 1894, when 'Ouida' (Maria Louise Ramé) replied to Sarah Grand's 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question' in the *North American Review*. Though the New Woman had important literary and discursive antecedents – the wild woman, odd women, the Girton Girl, and so forth – it was in the mid-1890s when she flourished. Sally Ledger, for example, one of the most significant literary scholars of the New Woman, references the cultural politics of the 1880s but almost exclusively examines literary works and figures from the 1890s. With the significant exceptions of Olive Schreiner and Mona Caird's 1880s journalism on marriage, all prominent New Woman texts date from the 1890s. Scholars, such as Ann Ardis, who have importantly performed broader surveys, proffer many texts from the 1880s which fit the characteristics of New Woman prose, challenging the periodisation of the New Woman (31). Yet, even in her extensive list of New Woman fiction from 1880-1920, of over one hundred texts, less than a dozen were published before 1890. While some of the intense focus on the 1890s, with particular interest usually paid to 1893-5, may be arbitrary and a partial product of canonisation rather than wholly of

historical prevalence, the historical evidence strongly suggests, and academic discourse certainly constructs, the New Woman as a product of the 1890s. Why, then, has Amy Levy, whose death precedes the coining of the moniker by five years, been labelled a New Woman writer?

Iveta Jusová's 2005 monograph, *The New Woman and Empire*, features examinations of four woman writers: Sarah Grand, George Egerton, Elizabeth Robbins and Amy Levy. Jusová is more aware than most of her uneasy positioning of Levy, writing in her Introduction that:

It needs to be noted that temporally Levy's career preceded those of the other three New Woman authors discussed in this book. With Levy committing suicide in 1889, her life was already over before the other women's careers took off. ... The placement of the Levy chapter at the end of my book reflects (1) the still relative novelty of this author in the New Woman scholarship ... and (2) my desire to explore these materials in relation to the authors' respective apparent variance from hegemonic views concerning racial politics. Viewing them through the lens of race, I consider Levy's writing the most complex of those of the four women analyzed in this study. (10-11)

The reading given here, of Levy's poetic and political complexity on a spectrum of New Woman or *fin de siècle* writers, echoes the representations of other scholars who situate Levy within predominately 1890s discourse, yet argue for her particularity rather than similarity. Beckman, the greatest researcher of Levy's French influences and connections, makes a similar argument in 'Amy Levy: Urban Poetry, Poetic Innovation, and the Fin-de-Siècle Woman Poet': 'Levy was one of the poets who pioneered symbolist methods in England' (224). This is despite the fact that 'almost every literary history or handbook says that the French symbolists began to influence English poets only in the 1890s' (224). Beckman establishes that Levy was reading Baudelaire, and makes a strong case for Mallarmé, too ('Amy Levy: Urban' 210-212). Ana Parejo Vadillo's argument is again similar:

the subject of Amy Levy is an important one now because she is increasingly being recognized as crucial to our understanding of the *fin-de-siècle* period, since her writings challenge the way in which we think about the interconnections between the discourses of gender and race in British aestheticism and the New Woman novel. (*Women Poets* 38)

Jusová argues that Levy's writings concerning race, imperialism and colonialism are more nuanced and resistant than popular women writers of the preceding decade, and Beckman argues for Levy's position as a pioneer within *fin de siècle* literature, and Parejo Vadillo, while actually historicising far more specifically and mounting a sophisticated argument concerning space, mobility, gender and representation, nevertheless introduces her chapter on Levy with references to 'the discourses of gender and race in British aestheticism and the New Woman novel'. It appears from these few examples that Levy does not fit entirely the terms of reference literary scholarship has tended to place her in.

The other significant feature of Levy scholarship is the frequent compartmentalisation of Levy as a Jewish writer or a woman writer. This compartmentalisation implicates Levy in discourses of race, gender, and sexuality which she herself was often writing against. Sarah Minsloff, in her review of Levy criticism, observes: 'Minority identity was the reason for Levy's exile into literary obscurity; it was the means by which she was recovered to critical attention, and it has remained the crux of critical work on Levy's writing' (1318). This interest in Levy's minor status is unsurprising, as what we know of her life indicates that she herself was interested in theorising, perhaps embracing, the minor as an epistemological frame. The overwhelming focus on Levy to date as a minority figure, though, has tended to eschew the extent to which Levy actively worked against stable notions of identity and did not embrace or advocate for what we would now call 'identity politics'. Levy,

rather, uses the minor as a literary technique to represent, or acknowledge the impossibility of representation of, ontologies and epistemologies which have historically – and, in some cases, continue to be – denied and erased. Levy's essay on Thomson provides one framework through which to analyse her work.

In 1883, Levy published an essay in *The Cambridge Review* on the writings of James Thomson, author of 'The City of Dreadful Night', an epic poem first serialised in Charles Bradlaugh's atheist *National Reformer* during 1874, and later collected in *The City of Dreadful Night and Other Poems* (1880). Levy observed of Thomson in her essay that:

He is distinctly what in our loose phraseology we call a minor poet; no prophet, standing above and outside things, to whom all sides of a truth (more or less foreshortened, certainly) are visible; but 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)

The narrative perspective that Levy alludes to here, a literary mode that eschews omniscience and distanced objectivity in favour of a 'passionate' partiality, is a technique she would later adopt enthusiastically in her third and final collection of poetry published posthumously in 1889, *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse*. Levy, however, would more explicitly reference Thomson in her second collection of poetry, *A Minor Poet and Other Verse* (1884) in which the title poem, a dramatic monologue which follows the final contemplations of a male poet, is an homage to Thomson.

However, this excerpt is also an indication of Levy's vast literary and cultural knowledge and is an allusion to Charles Baudelaire's 'The Painter of Modern Life':

Fortunately from time to time there come forward righters of wrong, critics, amateurs, curious enquirers, to declare that Raphael, or Racine, does not contain the whole secret, and that the minor poets too have something good, solid and delightful to offer; and finally that however much we may love *general* beauty,



as it is expressed by classical poets and artists, we are no less wrong to neglect *particular* beauty, the beauty of circumstance and the sketch of manners.  
(emphasis original 1)

Both Baudelaire and Levy value the particular beauty and truth of ‘minor poets’, refusing to measure their art within or against universal models. It is impossible to know whether the allusion to Baudelaire here is intentional or incidental, yet Levy was fluent enough in French to perform paid translations (Beckman, ‘Urban’ 208) and references to Baudelaire and the French symbolists abound in her work, not least through her intense literary preoccupation with the city. Levy’s interest in “minor” experiences and use of “minor” literary techniques allowed her to represent subjectivities in such a way that avoided, if temporarily, some of the oppressive aspects of discursive power.

While Levy’s earlier writings contain analyses of discourse, it is in her late poetry that she most successfully evades the boundaries of discourse. The poetry within *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse* celebrates liminality and transience; it refuses stable notions of self and space. The refusal to be fixed and to be known creates, in its evasion of subjectifying power, a limited form of freedom. Arguably its quintessential figure, one figure of the nineteenth century who was also trying to evade some of the subjectifying discourses of the metropolis is the *flâneur*. Popularised by the poetry and essays of Charles Baudelaire, the *flâneur* is a necessarily ambiguous figure. He, and it is almost always a he, is a stroller. He was transitory and he avoids the gaze of others. He is often an artist. His subject is the city. He is modern. Baudelaire wrote that ‘He is an “I” with an insatiable appetite for the “non-I”’ (9). In the post-Enlightenment world, the *flâneur* personified dissent against rationality and knowledge. For the *flâneur*, the city lives. As it moves and changes, it is the *flâneur*’s task to render ‘the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent’ (13). Baudelaire writes:

For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. (9)

Amy Levy, particularly in her final collection of poetry, joined in the celebration of this modern city and the poet's role in it. The closing lines of 'London in July' attest to this: 'The summer in the city's heart-- / That is enough for me' (15-16). The *flâneur* provides a useful framework for thinking about Levy's construction of, and challenges to, identity and subjectivity. In attempting to draw parallels between the *flâneur*, Baudelaire's modernity and Amy Levy, though, the problem of gender appears. As alluded to above, the *flâneur* is coded masculine. The city, upon which *flânerie* is contingent, was gendered (and classed) as a masculine space. Industry, commerce, governance, and the political world: these were the domains of middle and upper class men. The domain of middle and upper class women was, of course, the home. What, then, of a nineteenth-century *flâneuse*?

Janet Wolff's influential article 'The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Identity', identifies that narratives of modernity had concerned themselves with 'the public world of work, politics and city life' and that these accounts almost exclusively featured the lives and experiences of men (37). New forms of production and labour throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries increasingly replaced artisanal work, which had often been located within or adjoining the domestic, home space. Industrialisation shifted the practices and politics of space. Work was increasingly disengaged from the home, as the modern factory and the modern office emerged following technological advancements and the growth of big industry such as

banking, insurance, and telegraphy which required clerical labour on an unprecedented scale. Following these “modern” advancements, Wolff argues that in the nineteenth century:

Men and women may have shared the privatisation of personality, the careful anonymity and withdrawal in public life; but the line drawn increasingly sharply between the public and private was also one which confined women to the private, while men retained the freedom to move in the crowd or to frequent cafes and pubs. The men’s clubs replaced the coffee houses of earlier years. (41)

Here, the creation of highly gendered and politicised space is manifest. The public sphere was masculine and the private sphere was feminine. Associated with this politics of space were the limited, and seemingly mutually exclusive, roles available to women: the angel in the house, or the fallen woman. This ideological limitation meant that, at least in theory, if an unchaperoned woman were present in public space, she was removed from her appropriate sphere and was then necessarily deviant: a fallen woman.

The *flâneur* and the prostitute share, if problematically, a spatial freedom. As Sally Ledger writes, ‘There could be no female equivalent of the *flâneur* since any woman who loitered in the streets of the nineteenth-century was likely to be taken as a prostitute’ (‘Gissing’ 264). Susan Buck-Morss takes a more celebratory view, observing that ‘Prostitution was indeed the female version of flânerie’ (119). Prostitutes, at least ideologically, experienced an economic independence and spatial freedom denied to women who performed acceptable feminine respectability.

The prostitute, though, was not the only type of woman independently present in public space. As Wolff herself notes, ‘the “separation of spheres” was a very incomplete process’ (43). Many working class women still needed to leave the home to work, and from mid-century the growth of the department store enabled more middle and upper class women to engage with the urban public space. This commercial

element of women's modern experience has attracted scholarly attention. The scholarly story of modernity has increasingly included women in recounting the practice of shopping, feminine consumption and spectacle (see Sanders; Rappaport; Bowlby). This shift in focus was no doubt influenced by the availability of Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, not published until 1982, wherein Benjamin writes of the nineteenth century Parisian department store. Shopping gave women in London, and other metropolitan centres like Paris and New York City, a socially acceptable reason to be present in public space. Growing alongside consumer-capitalism, shopping became a leisure activity that allowed women not only to embrace the role of consumer, but to assume, at least in part, the role of the *flâneur*. Dina Copelman has written of the nineteenth-century female shopper:

The very experience of being a consumer – of goods, of services, of leisure – replicated some of the key features of spectacle: it was often a highly visual experience, it brought one out in to the public, it stimulated fantasies of multiple selves that could present themselves to varied audiences. (50)

The practice of capitalist consumption facilitated processes of self-fashioning and self-creation for middle and upper class women, allowing a specific (if restrictive) form of agency. Rita Felski's influential study, *The Gender of Modernity*, notes that by the late-nineteenth century 'the consumer was frequently represented as a woman' (61). By shifting the narrative focus of modernity from production and rationalisation to consumption and desire, women are immediately resituated and positioned not only in the sphere of the urban and the modern, but explicitly in the sphere of the public (Felski 61-2).

Alongside this rise of commerce and consumption and the shift in men's working environments discussed above was, of course, the rise of the retail and hospitality workforce, many of whom were women (Holcombe 103). This new

generation of female shop assistants became colloquially known as “shopgirls”, a term that referred as much to a social identity as it did to an occupation. Amy Levy’s debut novel, *The Romance of a Shop*, engages with this new late-Victorian female figure, representing an inverse relationship between social mobility and spatial freedom.

In Wolff’s discussion of *flânerie*, she concedes that some women had some material presence in the public sphere. She nevertheless argues that shopping did not contain the necessary conditions for *flânerie*, and that women were otherwise objectified in public as signs of their husband’s wealth (44). Women’s activities, according to Wolff, cannot allow the ‘fleeting, anonymous encounter and the purposeless strolling’ of modernity’s *flâneur* (44). Finally, she concludes that ‘There is no question of inventing the *flâneuse*: the essential point is that such a character was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century’ (45).

Elizabeth Wilson provided the most comprehensive review of Wolff’s thesis, deconstructing not only women’s apparent invisibility in the public sphere but also Wolff’s rigid (re)construction of the *flâneur*. Wilson reveals women’s physical presence in the nineteenth-century city by proffering, for example, London guidebooks from the 1870s which list ‘places in London where ladies can conveniently lunch when in town for a day’s shopping and unattended by a gentleman’ (qtd. in Wilson 100). In discussing Wolff’s privileging of bourgeois experience, Wilson notes of working-class women that:

Having in many cases no ‘private sphere’ to be confined to, they thronged the streets—this was one of the major threats to bourgeois order—and to read journalism of the mid and late nineteenth century is to be struck by their *presence* rather than their absence. (emphasis original 104)

Likewise, she notes that Wolff’s over-emphasis on the objectifying nature of *flânerie*, and in painting the *flâneur* as an inherently misogynist voyeur, misconceives the

‘financial insecurity and emotional ambiguity of the role’ (Wilson 106). Indeed, the *flâneur* was most commonly drawn by Baudelaire as an artist-figure (Gluck 53-54) and remains even now ‘a critical metaphor for the characteristic perspective of the modern artist’ (Parsons 5). That the *flâneur* is, therefore, working as he strolls, is seemingly lost on Wolff. While it is important not to overlook or deny the ideological weight that the gendered spatial spheres carried throughout the nineteenth century, as Deborah Parsons has noted (40), Wolff’s over-emphasis on the confinement of bourgeois women to the home has reinforced the deviancy of women who did enjoy spatial freedom, effectively excluding them from a history of modernity.

Deborah Parsons, in *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity*, discusses at length the various literary and socio-historical manifestations of the *flâneur*. In dealing with the question of gender, she argues that scholars have unduly foregrounded Walter Benjamin’s concept of the *flâneur* as a figure and instrument of surveillance, overlooking Benjamin’s ‘own admission that the social *flâneur* was a wandering, nostalgic, and dependent figure, both a product and consumer of the society of spectacle’ (41). And, further, that the tendency to overlook how the *flâneur* has and does operate as a metaphor for urban observation, and for the experiences and aesthetics of the urban more broadly, has foreclosed analyses of women’s experiences (and representations) of modernity (Parsons 40-41). Reimagining the *flâneur* as a marginal figure of society dissolves some of the uneasiness associated with women’s, and Amy Levy’s, *flânerie*.

Whereas Janet Wolff ultimately proposes to include women’s (and men’s) experiences of modernity by investigating the home and the private sphere, this thesis explores the life and literary works of one middle-class woman who did navigate public spaces of London independently and who consciously positioned herself as an observer,

artist even, of modernity. This study of Levy's fiction and non-fiction writings from the 1870s and 1880s reveals critical and creative epistemologies which are undoubtedly modern. Levy's *oeuvre* demonstrates an intense preoccupation with the ephemeral and the unintelligible, echoing Parson's descriptions of *flânerie*: 'adaptability, multiplicity, boundary-crossing, and fluidity' (41). Like Baudelaire, Levy sees the city as a space conducive to the creation of 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent' (Baudelaire 13). In Levy's works, the instability facilitated by the city and reflected in *flânerie* allows her to critique and resist dominant discourses while necessarily eschewing anything resembling an identity-based politics.

The first chapter of this thesis examines how gender, class and space, particularly public or semi-public space, is represented in Levy's work. Through a close reading of Levy's first novel, *The Romance of a Shop*, I argue that Levy is critical of conventional middle class femininity through her inverse representation of spatial and class mobility for her female characters. This novel is read alongside Levy's 1888 article, 'Women and Club Life', which articulates the importance of public space to women's professional and personal development. George Gissing's *The Odd Women*, which Levy's text prefigures, is analysed for its revealing characterisation of the shopgirl, Monica Madden. I examine how each text engages with the romance plot, and question how conventional Levy's romance really is. Finally, Chapter One looks at a range of Levy's poetry, predominantly her lyric poetry from her final collection *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse*, examining the representation of space, gender, class and subjectivity. I show how the modern city and street are celebrated spaces in Levy's work, where the usual boundaries of identity can, if only temporarily, be transcended.

In Chapter Two I examine Levy's childhood and adolescence, reading a series of letters, reprinted in Beckman's biography of Levy, written by Levy to her sister Katie Levy and others, in order to read how Levy articulates her sexuality and sexual identity. I read the letters queerly, resisting the imposition of assumed heterosexuality. The chapter goes on to analyse a range of what I call Levy's 'queer poetry', taken from *A Minor Poet and Other Verse* and *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse*. I consider such reading an act of queer recuperation and a correction to the historical and ongoing denial of lesbian sexuality. Terry Castle's *The Apparitional Lesbian* and Heather Love's *Feeling Backward* provide important theoretical frameworks for this chapter. In addition to unveiling the same-sex desire of Levy's poetry, I examine the models of identity and subjectivity which Levy more broadly presents, considering it markedly queer in composition.

The final chapter considers Levy's most complex novel, *Reuben Sachs: A Sketch*. The novel was contentious upon its release in 1889 and continues as an uneasy presence in Levy scholarship. I examine the novel's representation of Jewishness and, importantly, its techniques of representation, revealing the novel's self-reflexivity. Following Cynthia Scheinberg, I consider *Reuben Sachs* to engage thematically with anti-Semitism and read some of the novel's more contentious Jewish representations as critical explorations, rather than mere unknowing expressions, of anti-Semitism. Levy's writings for *The Jewish Chronicle* and a selection of her short stories are also considered, and inform my reading of *Reuben Sachs*. I analyse how Levy's novel answers back to a history of stereotyped Jewish representation, in particular George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, situating itself again self-consciously and critically within a literary tradition. The representation of gender and the failure of the romance plot in *Reuben Sachs* is considered in relation to Levy's earlier *The Romance of a Shop*.



Finally, reading the short story 'Cohen of Trinity', I observe Levy's most explicit representation of marginalisation and how representation and concomitant mis/recognition shapes subjectivity. I show how Amy Levy's work has critically engaged with the creation of identities and subjectivities, across and through the intersections of gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity and religion.

## *Chapter One*

### ‘An Omnibus Suffices Me’: Women in Fin de Siècle London

In ‘Women and Club Life’ published in Oscar Wilde’s *The Woman’s World* (1888), Levy investigates the burgeoning women’s and mixed-gender clubs of London, examining the professional and personal opportunities they opened for their patrons. She notes, through reference to an article in *Nineteenth Century*, that ‘no great performance in art or science can justly be expected from a class which is debarred from the inestimable advantages of a corporate social life’ (533). Refuting biologically determined notions of gender, Levy here recognises how the common exclusion of women from formal and informal sites of business and culture has restricted, if not foreclose, many opportunities for women’s professional growth. Previously:

She has had to fight her way unknown and single-handed; to compete with a guild of craftsmen all more or less known to one another, having easy access to one another, bound together by innumerable links of acquaintance and intercourse. It is uphill work with her, unless she be somebody’s sister, or somebody’s wife, or unless she have the power and the means of setting in motion an elaborate social machinery to obtain what every average follower of his calling has come to regard as a right. (Levy, ‘Women’ 536)

Women’s clubs, during their brief popularity from the late 1880s until the early twentieth century, provided a space for women (and men, depending on the club) to socialise, study and network outside of a familial sphere that had previously not only dictated women’s social intercourse but which had also refused to recognise women’s solitude and leisure as respectable (Levy, ‘Women’ 533).

Levy’s work on mixed-gender and women’s clubs reflects the changing spatial politics of London during the late-nineteenth century. Her clear advocacy for club life shows that although spaces of consumption and leisure were increasingly open to

middle-class women during the period, the sites where formal and informal business was transacted often remained closed to them. Alan Robinson has noted how, from the mid-century, modernity was able to encompass and expand uneven spatial freedoms:

Through their participation in the new commercialised leisure, genteel women enjoyed unprecedented access to ‘public places’ and, through debating societies and the forum of print culture, to the Habermasian ‘public sphere’, but not to public office or to taverns, clubs and the largely male preserve of coffee-houses, where intelligence was gathered and business deals struck. They frequented circulating libraries, concerts, plays, opera, assemblies, ridotoes and masquerades, shopped for ‘luxuries’, and promenaded in pleasure gardens as well as in the Park. But although their civilising influence on the reformation of manners was regarded as vital to this culture of polite sociability, they were disbarred from most forms of male agency, and were constantly reminded that a prime function of fashionable venues was as markets where they circulated as commodities on display. (41)

Levy was aware of the unfair disadvantages present for women from a young age. At a mere thirteen years of age, she won the Junior Prize Review in *Kind Words Magazine for Boys and Girls* (1875) for her review of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*.

Towards its conclusion she wrote that:

Of one fault we must accuse the authoress—a very common one at the present time—that of introducing too many learned allusions, &c ; it is perhaps more excusable in a *woman* than in a *man* ; for it is only natural that she should wish to display what public opinion has denied her sex—a classical education. (318)

Here the young Levy acknowledges the restrictions placed upon women which necessarily constrain their professional work. In ‘Women and Club Life’, the informal education of the club is likened to other spaces of learning: ‘In class-room and lecture-theatre, office and art-school, college and club-house alike, woman is waking up to a sense of the hundred and one possibilities of social intercourse’ (532-3). The disadvantages of women’s professional isolation are further explored in fictional form in Levy’s novel *The Romance of a Shop*. The novel features four recently orphaned

sisters who embark on a career in professional photography. Though largely successful by the novel's end, the sisters' lives and careers are hindered by social structures and attitudes that privilege the professionalisation of men and assume the domestication of women.

Early in the sisters' photographic enterprise, *The Waterloo Place Gazette* wishes to interview the sisters, to which Gertrude responds that they are 'photographers, not mountebanks!' (90). They are aware that before they have established a reputation based on their products and services, they will be represented as charlatans. The narrator later references the painting career of Mr Oakley, stating that 'it was probably only owing to the countenance of his brothers of the brush that he was able to sell his pictures at all' (111). Susan Bernstein points out that the phrase 'brothers of the brush' is an allusion to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and that the exclusive advantages of professional networks were open to Mr Oakley (111, footnote 2). The Lorimer sisters, on the other hand, 'knew little of the world, and of the workings of the complicated machinery necessary for getting on in it; and while chance favoured them in the matter of gratuitous advertisement, devoted their energies to keeping up their work to as high a standard as possible' (135). Like Levy's depiction of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her *Kind Words* review, the professional women in Levy's fiction must overcompensate in skill for what they lack in gendered cultural capital.

This chapter begins with an introduction to 'Women and Club Life' because it encapsulates some of the relationships between gender, urbanity, class and mobility that feature in Levy's literary works. Levy saw the city as a space of possibility. Her poetry in particular reveals an identification with the city and with London. In 'London Poets', she places the poem's speaker within a geographically-defined literary history:

They trod the streets and squares where now I tread,

With weary hearts, a little while ago;  
When, thin and grey, the melancholy snow  
Clung to the leafless branches overhead;  
Or when the smoke-veiled sky grew stormy-red  
In autumn; with a re-arisen woe  
Wrestled, what time the passionate spring winds blow;  
And paced scorched stones in summer:-- they are dead. (1-8)

The claim on the city which Levy makes in 'London Poets' is a challenge to nineteenth-century ideologies of gender. As a middle class woman, the city was not a space which Amy Levy could occupy. During the mid-Victorian period, paranoia surrounding prostitution had brought into focus how the narrow discursive roles available to women – represented in their simplest form by the nineteenth-century tropes of “the angel in the house” and “the fallen woman” – were related to the politics of space. To be unchaperoned in public risked categorisation as a “public woman” or prostitute. Women’s identities were largely constructed in relation to the family and women were, therefore, as daughters, wives and mothers, discursively relegated to the home. To be visible outside of the familial relation, for example by wandering the streets of London alone, was therefore a deviant act.

Middle class women’s ‘necessary if ambivalent identification with the woman of the streets’ (Nord, ‘The Urban Peripatetic’ 364) became apparent through the introduction during the 1860s of legislation known as the Contagious Diseases Acts which attempted to curb the spread of venereal disease by allowing police to stop and arrest prostitutes (or supposed prostitutes) and forcibly inspect them for infection. If a woman was deemed to be infected she would be remanded in a “lock hospital” until cured. In her exploration of the social movement led by Josephine Butler during the 1870s to have the acts repealed, Deborah Nord has shown that the Acts revealed ‘for some middle class women what had almost always been the case: that, when they

ventured onto city streets under the conditions necessary to urban strolling and observation, they took on the persona of the fallen woman' ('The Urban Peripatetic' 365). Though the Acts were repealed in 1886, the anxiety concerning prostitution, increasingly from social purity and anti-vice groups, resulted in Metropolitan police temporarily moving prostitutes on from one area to the next (Walkowitz, *City* 24). The result of these crackdowns, as with the Contagious Diseases Acts, was the accidental harassment and false arrests of non-prostitute women (Walkowitz, *City* 24). This was indeed the case for a young milliner in 1887, Elizabeth Cass, who, while out one evening on Regent Street to purchase gloves, was arrested for solicitation (Walkowitz, 'Going Public' 9). Though the charges against Miss Cass were eventually dismissed, the judge presiding over the case cautioned her that 'no respectable woman would be found on Regent Street at nine in the evening' ('Going Public' 9). When to be alone on the streets after nightfall was to be treated as suspect, the rights of sex workers necessarily became the rights of all self-determining women of London. That the figure of the prostitute, as many scholars have noted, was a source of great anxiety during the nineteenth century is unsurprising. Despite her lowered social standing, the prostitute navigated, at least symbolically, outside of patriarchal influence and in doing so she demonstrated knowledge of the city and its spaces. Young, unmarried middle-class women were the most heavily chaperoned women exactly because their independent presence in public space would indicate circumvention of the patriarchal control and ownership of the husband and the father (Wilson 93). Levy's poetry and prose fiction challenge and sometimes defy these gendered spatial politics of the nineteenth century.

As the history of the Contagious Diseases Acts and their repeals illuminate, for women the relationship between social/class mobility and urban spatial mobility was an inverse one. To be considered middle or upper class, to be respectable, necessitated

limiting one's independent movement and travel. This inverse relationship is signalled by Levy in an 1887 letter written to Vernon Lee:

I dined with Miss Blomfield on Tuesday & went down with her to a working girls Club at Westminster. Somehow those girls fr. the streets, with their short & merry lives, don't excite my compassion half as much as small bourgeoisie shut up in stucco villas at Grosvenor or Islington. Their "enforced respectability" seems to me really tragic. (Letter 31 267)

While it is unclear if the visit by Levy and Miss Blomfield was philanthropic, journalistic or even merely voyeuristic in nature, it is clear that Levy sees something enviable in the lives of working- and lower-class women. The comment regarding the small bourgeoisie suggests through contrast that the working girls are not forced to act "respectably" and are not restricted to the domesticated private sphere where women's roles and activities are created and regulated by the patriarchal and the familial.

Two years later, in 1889, Levy published a short story 'Eldorado at Islington', again in Wilde's *The Woman's World*. The short piece follows a night and day in the life of young Eleanor Lloyd, as she laments her unrealised desires and briefly sees hope in the form of a mistaken family inheritance. The story begins:

The houses in the terrace were of grey stucco, with bow-windows and flights of steps out of all proportion to their size.

The main road ran along the bottom, and the remaining two sides were bounded by stretches of blank wall, above which a few sickly plane-trees were fluttering their leaves in the August air.

Eleanor Lloyd from her window in the roof, could see not only the wall and the plane-trees, but, by dint of craning her neck, the High Street itself, with its ceaseless stream of trams and omnibuses. There was a public-house at the corner, and, as the door swung backwards and forwards, Eleanor caught glimpses of the lively barmaid behind her tall white tap-handles. A group of flower-girls, with uncurled feathers and straight fringes, stood outside on the pavement, jesting with the 'busmen and passers-by. Eleanor, who was a "lady" (Heaven help her!) used sometimes to envy the barmaid and the flower-girls their social opportunity. (227)

The similarities between these opening paragraphs and Levy's letter to Lee are startling. The story begins with a description of Eleanor's house and street. She must crane her neck to see beyond the grey villas, blank walls and sickly plane-trees to gaze upon the High Street. The street itself is drawn as a dynamic and lively space, with its ceaseless stream of activity. There she sees urban characters – barmaids, flower girls, busmen and anonymous wanderers. The barmaid is described as lively, while the flower-girls jest with strangers. This is contrasted with Eleanor's static viewing-position at her attic windowsill. As the story continues, we realise that this is Eleanor's only form of amusement: 'She had been sitting there all afternoon, and now the sun was setting. There was nothing for her to do' (228). The setting of the sun, then, brings Eleanor despair:

And now, as a great red flame lit up the west, there came over Eleanor one of those half-rapturous fits of longing, those fierce yearnings for happiness, which most of us know in youth; which are not noble, not beautiful, perhaps; certainly in no way to be encouraged; which are only infinitely cruel and infinitely sad.

So the cry went up from her, the human, passionate cry from this helpless, fluttering creature caught – oh, the irony of it! – in a pitiless network of suburban streets. (228)

The *suburban* streets are here drawn as a cage, imprisoning Eleanor. The irony here is that her comparatively high social class has actually condemned Eleanor to isolation. As the sun sets Eleanor experiences a deep longing for the unattainable liveliness she has seen and felt from the High Street. The language of 'Eldorado at Islington' mirrors a poem, 'Captivity,' from *London Plane-Tree and Other Verse* published in the same year. Its first two stanzas read:

The lion remembers the forest,  
The lion in chains;  
To the bird that is captive a vision  
Of woodland remains.



One strains with his strength at the fetter,  
In impotent rage;  
One flutters in flights of a moment,  
And beats at the cage. (1-8)

The lion and the bird have, like Eleanor, seen freedom, which makes their captivity all the more tragic. The poem's second half shifts to first person as the speaker decries her own entrapment. The experience here of captivity, of the loss of autonomy and the foreclosure of opportunity and access, speaks to Levy's broader critiques of suppressive social conventions, be they related to gender, class, race, religion or sexuality. In Levy's work, as seen in 'Eldorado at Islington', the urban street whether travelled directly or vicariously, is a site of exposed possibility. Levy was not the only woman to find thrilling possibility in the street. Margaret McMillan, who lived as a governess in Bloomsbury in the 1880s, 'associated urban adventure with a transgression of gendered class identity' (Walkowitz, *City* 71). She found, in the "roaring boundless human sea", an opportunity to exist 'outside the constraints of genteel femininity' (qtd. in Walkowitz, *City* 71). Hierarchies and conventions, indeed significations, break down in the bustling and rustling metropolis.

Levy's work demonstrates an interest in liminality, in identities and actions which slip between or defy categorisation and articulation. In Levy's debut novel, *The Romance of a Shop*, she represents a new discursive class of women: shop girls. These were women whose lives challenged the dichotomy of house angel/fallen woman. The changing nature of commerce and consumption from the mid-nineteenth century had given rise to the feminine leisure activity of shopping and the new vocation of the "shop girl". This happened as Britain experienced a revolution in the distributive trades, necessitating a new (and not necessarily skilled) workforce to meet the demands of mass production, largely supplanting artisanal and apprentice labour (Sanders 20). As

commerce and consumption grew so, too, did the retail and service industry, which were (and continue to be) disproportionately constituted by women. Between 1861 and 1911, women's overall workforce participation in England and Wales grew 44.2 per cent (compared to 77 per cent for men), yet growth rates for the occupations of teacher, nurse, shop assistant, clerk, and civil servant grew for women during the same period at a staggering 307 per cent, while for men it grew at a still great but comparatively much smaller 192.3 per cent (Holcombe 18). The growth rates over the same period for retail industries alone show an even greater gender disparity (Holcombe 205). This, alongside the invention of the typewriter machine and the growth in female clerical work (or 'typewriters' as typists were called), necessitated another public presence of unchaperoned, though now not totally deviant, women.

The increasing entrance of women into certain sections of the workforce from the mid-century signalled not only a shift in ideologies of gender and space but it reflected the British demographic gender imbalance present since at least mid-century. The title of George Gissing's 1893 novel, *The Odd Women*, referred to the million or so "extra" women in Britain at the time. This "problem" in gender numbers is given voice in the novel by New Woman character Rhoda Nunn who declares that there are 'half a million more women than men in this happy country of ours', adding 'So many *odd* women – no making a pair with them' (emphasis original 37). An article from 1859 published in the *Edinburgh Review* by renowned radical Harriet Martineau is 'frequently credited with having first shocked the public into an awareness of the problem of "redundant women," that is, the unmarried' (Holcombe 10). Martineau used data from the 1851 census to argue that with women out-numbering men in Britain by half a million, single women could no longer depend on marriage for their future economic security. During the remainder of the nineteenth century and in the first two

decades of the twentieth, numerous articles appeared in periodicals reflecting, often anxiously, on this “surplus” of women (Freeman and Klaus 394).

Estimates from the turn of the twentieth century number female shop assistants in England between half a million and one million (Evans, ‘We are Photographers’ 27), with Holcombe stating that it was ‘by far the largest group of middle-class women workers in the country’ (Holcombe 103). One of the contemporary concerns surrounding women in retail employment was the ‘living-in system’, whereby employers provided dormitory-style housing for the female employees, including the provision of a latchkey which allowed women to let themselves in late at night (and, therefore, the freedom to come and go as they pleased). As Amy Levy implies in ‘Women and Club Life’, the latch-key-toting woman was a commonly denigrated stereotype: ‘The female club-lounger, the *flâneuse* of St. James’s Street, latch-key in pocket and eye-glasses on nose, remains a creature of the imagination’ (366). Historians Ruth Freeman and Patricia Klaus write that:

The ‘latch-key girl’ in both England and the United States became a synonym for one type of new woman – the responsible and independent woman who had her own flat or rooms in the city, left early in the morning for work and returned, often late (so the story writers described and parents feared), after an evening at the theater or club. Able to live alone or with a friend respectably, and employed at a job that provided income sufficient for rent, food, clothing, and possibly gifts and travel, she had a freedom of action scarcely dreamed about by women in the earlier part of the century (401).

Whether as typists or shop assistants, working young women found in new industries and occupations unprecedented ‘freedom of action’. The respectability that these late-Victorian women had and the class position they occupied appears fluid, with many scholars (including Holcombe; Freeman and Klaus; Copelman), positioning these new tertiary sector female workers as part of the growing middle class and yet others (including Parratt ‘Making Leisure’; Ledger ‘Gissing’) stipulating that they were a

cause of anxiety and frequently an object of reform measures. The representations of shopgirls in fiction and the periodical press, however, reveal the anxiety their emergence produced.

The concerning issues surrounding this new generation of female workers centred not on the work *per se*, but on the lifestyles and opportunities that being a single working woman garnered. Census statistics show that most female wage-earners were young and unmarried, with only ten per cent of married women in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries being formally engaged in paid employment (Parratt 'Little Means' 32). Even though a woman's work necessarily impacted upon her class position and social status (unfavourably, generally speaking), research by Catriona Parratt strongly suggests that it was, in fact, 'young, unmarried wage-earners who had the greatest means and most free time for leisure, while wives and mothers had few resources or opportunities for participating in the ebullient popular leisure culture with which the period is associated' (38). Lise Sanders writes:

Predominately considered to be single wage-earners unencumbered with dependents, [female shop assistants] had few expenses beyond their personal needs, and as unmarried women they had the liberty to spend their leisure time, however little there was, as they pleased. Living away from the familial home (or at any rate spending a significant period of time—their lengthy workdays—beyond the confines of the domestic arena), female shop assistants occupied a relatively unsupervised sphere of social interaction, and therefore possessed a certain degree of freedom of action both at work and in their leisure practices. (20-21)

Thus, although for women marriage was often an upward move in class mobility, it frequently limited their physical spatial mobility, leisure, and freedom.

Complicating the gendered divisions between the public and private spheres, these new women workers were, as mentioned, a source of anxiety for some

contemporary commentators. Dina Copelman, referring to this class as the *fin de siècle* workforce, writes that:

The *fin-de-siècle* workforce joined and blurred boundaries between two older categories of women also out in public: at one end the ‘public’ women of the streets, prostitutes, barmaids, market women and other poor or disreputable women who loomed large in the sensationalist imagination; at the other end the ‘ladies’ engaged in charity work, shopping and visiting who, though more restricted in their movements, were also increasingly taking part in the expanded consumer and leisure opportunities of the metropolis. (49)

In Maude Stanley’s 1890 *Clubs for Working Girls*, she calls for clubs and homes to regulate and surveil working girls and women, instruct their behaviour and guide them away from “vice”. The following passage of Stanley’s is indicative of the anxieties surrounding shop girls in the late-nineteenth century:

Our work-girls—children still, though wage-earning members of the family—seek their recreation where alone they can find it, by loitering about the streets after dark when work is over, with some chosen companion; often it is with girls, sometimes in rough play with boys and lads. After a time the walk round, the looking into the shop-windows, the passing by the gaslit stalls in the evening markets, cease to have interest. Then comes, according to their means, the visit to the music hall, the cheap theatres, the gin-palaces, the dancing saloons, and the wine shop; then soon follow other temptations, the easy sliding into greater sin, the degradation and the downfall of womanly virtue. (11-12)

Stanley here draws a causal line from independent recreation and leisure to sex outside of wedlock. Stanley assumes, like many during the Victorian period, that if a woman is not occupied in a role as a daughter, wife or mother, she will engage in (increasingly) “immoral” behaviour. These girls are described as both endangered and dangerous. The urban entertainment available to the working classes – music halls and cheap theatre – are mentioned in the same breath as gin palaces and wine stores, from which the “easy” will further descend into sexual sin.

By the 1890s the shop girl was a recognisable literary figure, reproduced as the protagonist in a number of novels and plays throughout the *fin de siècle* period.<sup>5</sup> Most famous among these is Gissing's *The Odd Women*, in which a leading protagonist, Monica Madden, is employed as a shop assistant until she is married. Monica must find work after the death of her father (her last remaining parent) and takes employment in a drapery shop in London as a "living-in" worker. As the narrator notes, the gruelling labour conditions Monica endures here are contrasted with the freedoms available on nights and weekends off:

In the drapery establishment where Monica Madden worked and lived it was not (as is sometimes the case) positively forbidden to the resident employees to remain at home on a Sunday; but they were strongly recommended to make the utmost possible use of that weekly vacation. ... Not only did they insist that the Sunday ought to be used for bodily recreation, but they had no objection whatever to their young friends taking a stroll after closing-time each evening. Nay, so generous and confiding were they, that to each young person they allowed a latchkey. The air of Walworth Road is pure and invigorating about midnight; why should the reposeful ramble be hurried by consideration of weary domestics? (25)

The narrator goes on to note that, unlike some of Monica's colleagues, she is too tired to walk late in the evenings after work but that she does take advantage of her free time on Sundays by 'free wandering' around the city. Her colleagues likewise take advantage of their unsupervised hours, including one woman who, after a particularly late arrival home, is implicitly represented as a prostitute: 'She was a young woman with a morally unenviable reputation, though some of her colleagues certainly envied her' (48). Later in the novel, another former colleague of Monica's will also "fall" and become engaged in prostitution. The troubled "morality" which befalls these two

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<sup>5</sup> Williamson, Anne and Williamson Charles, *Winnie Child, the Shop Girl* (1914); Newte, Horace, *Pansy Meares: the story of a London shopgirl* (1912?); Wotton, Mabel E., 'The hour of her life' (1896); Mansfield, Katherine, 'The Tiredness of Rosabel' (1908); Levy, Amy, *The Romance of a Shop* (1888); Applin, Arthur, *Shop Girls* (1914).

characters is reflective of the paranoia people such as Stanley exhibited regarding young working women in London at the *fin de siècle*.

The public nature of the shop assistant's work meant that she was brought in to contact, without "proper introduction", with people of different genders and classes, while at work or leisure and, if not in a living-in situation, while travelling to and from work. But the moral anxieties concerning young working women were more significant when considered specifically in relation to shop assistants. Shop assistants sometimes wore the clothes they were selling, becoming themselves objects of desire, commodification and consumption (Evans 28). For a young female worker to model the goods she was selling heightened the already problematic association between commerce, trade, and femininity. At the ideological intersection between commerce and femininity is the figure of the prostitute. Rachel Bowlby writes that 'Women's contradictory and crucial part in "the oldest trade in the world" – at once commodity, worker and (sometimes) entrepreneur – can be taken as emblematic of their significance in the modern commercial revolution' (6). The female shop worker and the prostitute's dual nature as both a commodity and an agent of sale mirrored the modern city's broader categorical transgressions. As Walter Benjamin writes in relation to the ambiguity inherent to Baudelaire's modern city:

Ambiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image, therefore, dream image. Such an image is afforded by the commodity per se: as fetish. Such an image is presented by the arcades, which are house no less than street. Such an image is the prostitute – seller and sold in one. (10)

The breakdown of commercial boundaries and boundaries of public and private space sexualised female shop assistants. As Sanders observed, these transgressions produced anxiety in the late-nineteenth century:

For the middle-class social historians writing the history of the shopgirl at the turn of the century, the practice of leisure was a priori considered within the context of sexuality. Every venture the young female shop assistant might make into an unregulated, public social space of leisure explicitly provoked a set of anxieties over her sexual and moral state. (39)

These sexual and moral anxieties are again reproduced in *The Odd Women* through interactions between Monica Madden and Edmund Widdowson, an older bachelor who becomes her husband. When Monica first meets Edmund and advises him how she plans to journey home via train, he expresses disdain: ‘Widdowson cast a curious glance at her. One would have imagined that he found something to disapprove in this ready knowledge of London transit’ (46). As Sally Ledger has persuasively argued, it is not the New Woman character, Rhoda Nunn, who ultimately upsets social order in *The Odd Women*, but the shop girl, Monica. While Rhoda and her colleague, Mary Barfoot, train single young women in sought-after and relatively respectable skills like typing ‘to avoid the necessity of conventional domesticity’, they ‘themselves are continually shown in cosy domestic settings’ (Ledger, ‘Gissing’ 272). Furthermore, although neither woman marries during the course of the narrative, Mary has ‘no mission to prevent girls from marrying suitably – only to see that those who can’t shall have a means of living with some satisfaction’ (51), while Rhoda is initially against marriage, she declines the offer of a ‘free union’ with Everard Barfoot, the man she loves, and instead wishes to be legally married (37). Though their romance plot is ultimately unsuccessful, Rhoda’s conventional sentimentality concerning marriage undermines her prior feminist assertions. Monica, on the other hand, does marry, but it is an almost immediately unhappy union for her, with Widdowson restricting her capacity to travel independently, especially in the evenings, and surveilling her disturbingly when she does. Monica’s marriage is not drawn as a happy one, and though the text is at best



ambivalent about Monica's time as a worker, it certainly does not celebrate her married life either. What it does, however, whether self-consciously or not, is reveal how marriage limits Monica's spatial freedoms.

One of Monica's first arguments with Widdowson revolves around her desire to visit with a friend alone. The following exchange takes place:

He answered abruptly,—

'Oh, but I can't have you going about alone at night.'

'Why not?' answered Monica, with a just perceptible note of irritation. 'Are you afraid I shall be robbed or murdered?'

'Nonsense. But you mustn't be alone.'

'Didn't I always use to be alone?'

He made an angry gesture.

'I have begged you not to speak of that. [...] You used to do all sorts of things that you never ought to have been obliged to do, and it's very painful to remember it.' (149)

It is later remarked of Widdowson, 'As soon as he understood that she desired freedom of movement, he became anxious, suspicious irritable' (153). As the first passage shows, Widdowson is not afraid for Monica's safety – it is nonsense that she could be murdered or robbed. Rather, it is the independence itself, associated by Widdowson with immorality, which troubles him. Nevertheless, despite disapproving of Monica's former work as a shop girl, Widdowson blames 'those people at Chelsea' (Rhoda Nunn and Mary Barfoot) for Monica's boldness and desire for free movement (162-3). While Widdowson's remarks need to be read in the context of his characterisation – as an unfairly jealous man – the narrator too attributes Monica's discontent elsewhere:

A great deal of this spirit and the utterance it found was traceable to her association with the women whom Widdowson so deeply suspected; prior to her sojourn in Rutland Street she could not even have made clear to herself the demands which she now very clearly formulated. Believing she had learnt nothing from them, and till of late instinctively opposing the doctrines held by Miss Barfoot and Rhoda Nunn, Monica in truth owed the sole bit of real

education she had ever received to those few weeks of attendance in Great Portland Street. Circumstances were now proving how apt a pupil she had been, even against her will. (167-8)

This is a curious assessment of Monica considering she demonstrated defiance and self-determination prior to visiting with Rhoda and Mary. In an early scene in the novel, Monica is harassed and followed on the street by Mr Bullivant and once alone with him inside the carriage of omnibus, tells him in no uncertain terms that his position and prospects are not such that he could fairly proposition any young woman (26-8).

Sally Ledger's argument that Monica is more problematic to *fin de siècle* society than Rhoda centres on her reading of Monica's confident and knowledgeable geographic navigation of the city. As previously mentioned, both Rhoda and Mary, although owning decidedly feminist thoughts, are remarkably domestic. They are rarely viewed outside of the home, leaving Ledger to conclude that in their case, '[h]eterosexual domesticity is replaced by a domesticity based on same-sex friendship' ('Gissing' 272). The New Woman figures of the novel are ultimately assimilated into Gissing's *fin de siècle* London scene and, though active in their feminist cause, they fail to disrupt or challenge institutionalised ideologies of gender. Monica, on the other hand, appears more disruptive (and is, tellingly, eventually killed off) to London society precisely because, unlike Rhoda and Mary, she insists on being a part of it.

Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop* is more consciously concerned with women's urban mobility than is Gissing's *The Odd Women*. Levy had first-hand experience, as a young middle-class woman in London, of both enjoying the freedom of urban movement and of being denied such freedoms. Like the women within her fictional work, Levy found that despite her education, middle-class upbringing and her ambition, many networks and opportunities that could advance her career as a writer were closed to her (Bernstein, 'Introduction' *Romance* 25). As Susan Bernstein notes,

the women's lives Levy created, like her own, sketch a 'decidedly mixed image of exhilarating freedom and overwhelming obstacles' ('Introduction' *Romance* 19).

Biographical research suggests that Levy would have been cognisant of contemporary issues surrounding young women in employment. One of Levy's closest friends, Clementina Black (to whom Levy dedicated a poem 'To Clementina Black'), was instrumental in the 1888 London matchgirls' strike, and published heavily on the issues confronting women in employment (Francis 'Why' 53). Black's friendship with Eleanor Marx (with whom Levy herself was also friends with)<sup>6</sup> informed her politics and long career in feminist activism. In 1886 Black became honorary secretary of the Women's Trade Union Association. Throughout her life she would be involved with Trade Union Congress (where she initiated a motion for equal pay), the Consumer's League, the Women's Industrial Council, the Anti-Sweating League and multiple suffrage organisations. Levy's friendships with the socialist-campaigning Black, Marx, and others including Olive Schreiner, situates Levy in an historical flashpoint of socialist feminism, even if her own relationship to socialism was more ambiguous (see Francis, 'Why'). The location that Levy choose for the sisters' photography studio and home is also significant. The fictional studio on Upper Baker Street is only a few doors down from Lincoln House, which in 1886 (two years before the novel's publication), was a home for working-class working women (Evans 30). Nevertheless, as the novel's title suggests, though, *The Romance of a Shop* is far from a socialist analysis of women's labour.

Published in 1888, *The Romance of a Shop*, tells the story of the Lorimer sisters who decide after the death of their father to capitalise on their childhood hobby and small inheritance to set up a photography studio in London. The sisters wish not only to

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<sup>6</sup> Eleanor Marx also translated *Reuben Sachs* into German.

gain financial independence but also to remain living together – conditions that would be impossible if they undertook traditionally feminine jobs such as nursing or teaching. The novel is rare for the period in that it represents women not only as shop assistants but as shop proprietors.<sup>7</sup> Leading protagonist Gertrude Lorimer anticipates the rise of the New Woman figure despite the novel (and Levy) pre-dating the figure's emergence in the 1890s. While Levy herself, we know from letters, considered this first novel to be lowbrow and entertaining rather than “serious” literature<sup>8</sup>, it represents some of the ideas concerning gender, the public sphere, and professional development which Levy analysed in ‘Women and Club Life’. Where ‘Women and Club Life’ focussed primarily on the experiences of middle-class women, *The Romance of a Shop*, like the later short story ‘Eldorado at Islington’, is focussed upon the middle and working classes, examining how class, gender, and freedom of movement and action intersect. Drawing from Linda Beckman’s scholarship and Iveta Jusová’s analysis in *The New Woman and Empire*, my reading interrogates the supposed realism of the novel, arguing instead for a self-conscious irony in its narration and relationship to nineteenth-century romantic and colonial tropes. Finally, the implications of the novel’s romance plots are analysed in relation to social class and danger.

The four Lorimer sisters in *The Romance of a Shop* each respond differently to the new social status and class position that befalls them after the death of their father and their pursuit of a non-traditional vocation. At the novel’s opening, the sisters range in age from thirty years (Frances) to seventeen (Phyllis), with Gertrude (twenty-three) and Lucy (twenty) in the middle. Gertrude is arguably the chief protagonist of the novel and comes closest to occupying the position of the *flâneuse* with her love of

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<sup>7</sup> Another example is Mabel E Wotton’s short story ‘An hour of her life’ which features a female floristry shop owner.

<sup>8</sup> See letters Levy wrote to Vernon Lee and to her sister, Katie: Letter 32 and Letter 33.

independent urban travel and interest towards art (she is identified early on as a writer). In the novel's opening scene, the sisters discuss their options for subsistence, which include an invitation for two of the sisters to live in India with an uncle, a home for another two with family friend Mrs Devonshire, and employment as a governess or teacher. All options would, however, require the sisters to separate from one another. Phyllis and Gertrude devise a plan to set up a professional studio but Fanny (Frances) cries that the operation of a shop is unbecoming: 'Oh, Gertrude, need it come to that – to open a shop?' (54). Wanting to convince her sister, Gertrude asks her to 'Think of all the dull little ways in which women, ladies, are generally reduced to earning their living! But a business—that is so different. It is progressive; a creature capable of growth; the very qualities in which women's work is dreadfully lacking' (55). Here again Levy represents women as constrained rather than incapable: women or, tellingly, 'ladies' are often 'reduced' to static enterprises, forbidden from professional and personal production in the public sphere. The narrator further invalidates Fanny's point of view:

As Lucy had said, Frances Lorimer was behind the age. She was an anachronism, belonging by rights to the period when young ladies played the harp, wore ringlets, and went into hysterics.

Living, moving, and having her being well within vision of three pairs of searching and intensely modern young eyes, poor Fan could permit herself neither these nor any kindred indulgences; but went her way with a vague, inarticulate sense of injury—a round, sentimental peg in the square, scientific hole of the latter half of the nineteenth century. (56)

Here Levy positions the temporal and spatial setting of *The Romance of a Shop* as distinctly 'modern', contrasting the novel's favoured modern protagonists with the traditional femininity of Fanny and of literary women past, sentimentalists out of place in the age of scientific rationalism.

The closest remaining relative to the sisters is their upper-middle class aunt, Caroline Pratt, who also fiercely disapproves of their business venture and operates throughout the novel as a counterpoint to Gertrude's feminist inclinations and insistence on independence. After initially referring to the proposed venture as 'nonsense':

Aunt Caroline, shifting her ground, ceased to talk of the scheme as beneath contempt, but denounced it as dangerous and unwomanly.

She spoke freely of loss of caste; damage to prospects – vague and delicate possession of the female sex – and of the complicated evils which must necessarily arise from an undertaking so completely devoid of chaperones. (72)

The shop girl, like the New Woman, attracted scrutiny for operating, at least in part, within the public sphere. Even though the sisters are not traditional shop girls, in that they also reside in their place of business and own it – that is, they are also producing, through training and skill, the goods they are selling – they are still doing so without a man or, as Aunt Caroline phrases it, devoid of chaperones. Levy removes some of the "moral" dangers of retail employment from the Lorimer sisters by having them reside in their own shop, though an assortment of characters' responses signals their fall in social standing. The narrator does not pity the sisters their fall, referring to their 'old set' as 'people with whom their intercourse had been a mere matter of social commerce' (82). One year into their venture, Lucy, Phyllis and Gertrude recount some of their new social experiences:

'Oh, I don't know,' observed Phyllis, lightly; 'some people have been rather horrid; have forgotten all about us, or not been nice. Don't you remember, Gerty, how Gerald St. Aubyn dodged round the corner near Baker Street the other day because he didn't care to be seen bowing to two shabby young women with heavy parcels? And, Lucy, have you forgotten what you told us about Jack Sinclair, when you met him, travelling from the north? How he never took any notice of you, because you happened to be riding third class, and had your old gown on? Jack, who used to make such a fuss about picking up one's pocket-handkerchief and opening the door for one.' (125-6)

Yet like the narrator earlier, Lucy responds that ‘That is the best of being poor; one’s chances of artificial acquaintanceships are so much lessened. One gains in quality what one loses in quantity’ (126). Some reactions, however, are potentially more damaging to the sisters, such as when landlady Mrs. Marybon temporarily assumes not only Phyllis (which is ‘what you’d expect from her, poor creature’) but also Gertrude of having an affair (169). Aunt Caroline also indicts the sisters’ behaviour as she learns of a friendship with a bachelor artist, Frank Jermyn, who lives across from road from their own studio on Baker Street. She confronts Gertrude about their fraternisation:

‘Is it, or is it not true, that you have scraped acquaintance with a young man who lodges opposite you; that he is in and out of your rooms at all hours; that you follow him about to his studio?’

‘That you go about to *public places* with him,’ continued Aunt Caroline; ‘that you have been seen, two of you and this person, in the upper boxes of a theatre?’ (emphasis added 101)

Though never explicitly stated, Aunt Caroline’s comments here imply a sexual impropriety on behalf of the sisters. That this is socially unrespectable (rather than merely immoral) is clear from Aunt Caroline’s particular anger that the sisters see Frank in public, where the gaze of others should have had a regulating effect on the sisters’ actions. Like the shop girl-prostitute connection in *The Odd Women*, Aunt Caroline’s moral outrage is indicative of the contemporary anxieties that were often projected upon service and retail women workers near the turn of the century. Commerce, independence and sexuality were inexplicably entwined (Evans 30-31; Walkowitz, *City* 46-47). Gertrude, however, refuses this sexualised reading, and instead identifies their difference in perspective:

Aunt, how shall I say it for you to understand? We have taken up life from a different standpoint, begun it on different bases. We are poor people, and we are learning to find out the pleasures of the poor, to approach happiness from

another side. We have none of the conventional social opportunities for instance, are we therefore to sacrifice all social enjoyment? You say we ‘follow Mr. Jermyn to his studio;’ we have our living to earn, no less than our lives to live, and in neither case can we afford to be slaves of custom. (101)

Gertrude divorces her aunt’s expectations from any naturalised understanding of gender or morality, suggesting simultaneously that these constructs of moral femininity are actually contingent upon occupying a certain class position which the Lorimer sisters are no longer able to do. Although, despite her gallant riposte, Gertrude is distressed by her aunt’s remarks (102), she also states that whether a man introduces himself in a studio, or whether he is introduced at a party, ‘it comes with much the same thing. In both cases you must use your judgment about him’ (97). Gertrude identifies the “dangers” of men as residing within their gender, rather than their social class. Echoing Levy’s romanticisation of working class “freedoms” in ‘Eldorado at Islington’, throughout *The Romance of a Shop* Gertrude finds that unexpected freedoms and opportunities avail themselves to her as she refuses to uphold social custom, deconstructing its regulating effects as she does so.

Gertrude, the most independently minded and “modern” of the sisters, takes great pleasure in her movement across the city. However, unlike Monica Madden in Gissing’s novel, she is more conscious of the role class plays in her spatial liberation. One of Gertrude’s newly learnt pleasures is the vantage-point gained from riding on the top, open tier of an omnibus. The narrator remarks on one such trip that:

Indeed, for Gertrude, the humours of the town had always possessed a curious fascination. She contemplated the familiar London pageant with an interest that had something of passion in it; and, for her part, was never inclined to quarrel with the fate which had transported her from the comparative tameness of Campden Hill to regions where the great city could be felt distinctly as they beat and throbbed. (80)



Though Gertrude's travels across London are all utilitarian – that is, required and with aim at a particular destination – the representations of her travels often recall a joy of watching, of freedom, and of engagement with the urban spectacle. They recall in their descriptions of the city the type of modernity envisaged earlier in the century by Baudelaire, and in her fascination and passion they recall the practice of *flânerie*. London is again a lively landscape, described by the narrator as beating and throbbing. It is contrasted with the 'comparative tameness' of Campden Hill, where Gertrude grew up in relative affluence. On one occasion, Gertrude comes 'careering up the street on the summit of a tall, green omnibus, her hair blowing gaily in the breeze, her ill-gloved hands clasped about a bulky notebook' (99). The speed of her travel is remarked upon. She is not the wandering poor artist-*flâneur* of Baudelaire's mid-century modernity, but rather a passenger in the increasingly mechanised modernity of late-Victorian London (see Parejo Vadillo). Her speed of movement is contrasted with the static gaze soon set upon her by Aunt Caroline: 'Now it is impossible to be dignified on the top of an omnibus, and Gertrude received her aunt's frozen stare of non-recognition with a humiliating consciousness of the disadvantages of her own position' (99-100). The gaze in *The Romance of a Shop* is imbued with meaning and always with power. It continually frames, focusses, reads, recognises or, as in this case, refuses to recognise subjects. As will be discussed further, the effects of misrecognition and unintelligibility is a continuing theme throughout Levy's work.

Like Gertrude, Levy herself liked to ride atop omnibuses, defying the contemporary convention that women should ride in the interior cabin (cited in Vadillo *Women Poets* 39). One advantage to riding on the top tier of an omnibus is the 360 degree vantage point. The freedoms and politics of looking from a bus are explored in Levy's poem, 'Ballade of an Omnibus': –

‘To see my love suffices me.’  
–*Ballades in Blue China*.

SOME men to carriages aspire;  
On some the costly hansoms wait;  
Some seek a fly, on job or hire;  
Some mount the trotting steed, elate.  
I envy not the rich and great,  
A wandering minstrel, poor and free,  
I am contented with my fate –  
An omnibus suffices me.

In winter days of rain and mire  
I find within a corner strait;  
The ’busmen know me and my lyre  
From Brompton and the Bull-and-Gate.  
When summer comes, I mount in state  
The topmost summit, whence I see  
Crœsus look up, compassionate –  
An omnibus suffices me.

I mark, untroubled by desire,  
Lucullus’ phaeton and its freight.  
The scene whereof I cannot tire,  
The human tale of love and hate,  
The city pageant, early and late  
Unfolds itself, rolls by, to be  
A pleasure deep and delicate.  
An omnibus suffices me.

Princess, your splendour you require,  
I, my simplicity; agree  
Neither to rate lower nor higher.  
An omnibus suffices me.

Here, in ‘Ballade of an Omnibus’, Levy positions the freedom of movement, specifically urban movement, as a sufficient condition for a contented life, rather than the taking of a lover, as would traditionally be the case (and to which the epigraph alludes). The first stanza introduces the speaker as a lower-class wanderer who does not envy the wealthy. The second stanza closes with reference to the compassionate gaze of Croesus, the King of Lydia (560-547 BC) renowned for his wealth, whereupon the speaker reiterates that ‘An omnibus suffices me’. The speaker renounces the

conventional value of both love and wealth. The deep yet delicate pleasure the speaker here gains from looking at the ‘city pageant’ echoes Gertrude’s love of the ‘London pageant’ (80). Alex Goody notes of Levy’s poetry that she ‘constructs view points (and points at which s/he is viewed) that enable her to use the transient city without being fixed and/or recognized as a transgressive woman’ (‘Passing’ 166). The omnibus works as one such panoramic viewpoint, where the speaker and subject, looking on the street below, operates from a moving, un-fixable quasi-public, quasi-private space. Though the speaker of Levy’s late poems are often gender-ambiguous, that the protagonist from her first novel, the speaker from ‘Ballade’ and Levy herself all approach the omnibus as a literal and metaphorical vehicle for *flânerie*, positions this modern transportation as a liberating site where conventions of class and gender can be displaced.

Gertrude’s spatial freedom is contrasted with that of her sisters, particularly the young and beautiful Phyllis. Where Gertrude rides a bus, sister Phyllis instead departs on a train. As Gertrude says ‘Because one cannot afford a carriage or even a hansom cab’, ‘is one to be shut up away from the sunlight and streets?’ (80). Where Gertrude enjoys London as an active participant, Phyllis’ experience is obstructed by the underground or mediated through a window. The narrator connects Gertrude’s artistic aptitude to her unconventionality: ‘Gertrude, as we know, was by way of being a poet. She had a rebellious heart that cried out, sometimes very inopportunedly, for happiness’ (71). Gertrude, the writer, is not represented as endangered in this public space.

Phyllis, on the other hand, is continually cast as an object of the gaze. When the sisters are first discussing their business enterprise and assigning themselves roles, Phyllis exclaims: “‘And I,” cried Phyllis, her great eyes shining, “I would walk up and down outside, like that man in the High Street, who tells me everyday what a beautiful picture I should make!’” (55). Foreshadowing her fall when she later sits for a study of

Cressida and then a portrait for aristocrat Sidney Darrell, Phyllis is frequently noted for her delicacy and beauty, and though she will succumb to consumption by the novel's end, her beauty is often noted as a cause for concern. Early in the novel, Gertrude reveals to friend Conny that she wishes Phyllis 'were not so very good-looking' (68). Beauty, in *The Romance of a Shop*, is connected to thoughtlessness and danger as Phyllis prizes aesthetics above ethics. She tells her sister in reference to post-mortem photographs of the late Lady Watergate: "Poor thing," said Phyllis; "what perfect features she has. Mrs. Maryon told us she was wicked, didn't she? But I don't know that it matters about being good when you are as beautiful as all that'" (88).

In Levy's fictional world, beautiful appearance comes at the price of intelligence and self-awareness. To be beautiful is to be spoiled, protected, and constrained from mature development. Gertrude is described in Chapter One as 'not a beautiful woman', though 'a certain air of character and distinction clung to her through all varying moods, and redeemed her from a possible charge of plainness' (51). At Frank's art showing, Darrell remarks that Gertrude is obviously 'the clever one' of the sisters because she is wearing shabby boots (117). Unlike Gertrude and Conny, who travelled the city looking at houses to lease, 'Phyllis was too delicate for such expeditions, and sat at home with Mrs. Devonshire, or drove out shopping' (73). The narrator further describes Phyllis as 'amiable but ironical; buoyant but never exuberant; the charming child that everybody conspired to spoil, that everybody instinctively screened from all unpleasantness' (73). Though Phyllis is undoubtedly vain, the narrative does not solely blame Phyllis for her inevitable fall. The society around her, which regulates and encourages certain attitudes and behaviours based on her appearance, is implicitly responsible.

The relative captivity of Phyllis is highlighted through her habit of gazing through the window. Though Phyllis and Gertrude both enjoy the act of looking, Phyllis is only shown doing so from the private, domestic space:

After the meal, Phyllis went over to the window, drew up the blind, and amused herself, as was her frequent custom, by looking into the street.

‘I wish you wouldn’t do that,’ said Lucy; ‘any one can see right into the room.’

‘Why would you waste your breath, Lucy? You know it is never any good telling me not to do things, when I want to.’

Gertrude, who had herself a secret, childish love for the gas-lit street, for the sight of the hurrying people, the lamps, the hansom cabs, flickering in and out the yellow haze, like so many fire-flies, took no part in the dispute, but set to work at repairing an old skirt of Phyllis’, which was sadly torn.

Meanwhile the spoilt child at the window continued her observations, which seemed to afford her considerable amusement.

[Phyllis watches Frank from across the street as the sisters talk.]

Wearying suddenly of the sport, Phyllis dropped the blind, and, coming over to Gertrude, knelt on the floor at her feet.

‘It is a little dull, ain’t it Gerty, to look at life from a top-floor window?’

A curious pang went through Gertrude, as she tenderly stroked the nut-brown head. (105-6)

Phyllis experiences life mediated through the window, which sends a ‘curious’ pang through her sister. Though the narrator recalls Gertrude’s ‘childish love’ of the streets, the reader knows that Gertrude, on her client visits and trips to the British Museum (77), has a deeper and livelier relationship to urban public space. Her love of the street is not from mere observation, but also from artistic inspiration, exemplified by the likening of hansom cabs to fire-flies.

Although Phyllis does fall by the novel’s end to ‘die the quintessential Victorian female death from consumption’ (Evans 37-38), the threat to Phyllis comes not from the controversial world of women’s professional work, but rather through the respectable, privately and domestically held, acquaintance with Sidney Darrell. As Elizabeth Evans

astutely summarises: ‘In spite of – or to spite – representations of urban dangers, Levy has Phyllis’s fall come through socially elevated circles, not through the city streets’ (38). The novel is lightly peppered with reference to perspective and the representational power of the gaze, which is heightened by the centrality of photography to the plot. In the artist’s studio she becomes an object of the male gaze, foreshadowed in the novel’s beginning, as Darrell turns her image and self into a product for consumption.

From Gertrude’s first meeting with him earlier in the novel, Darrell’s gaze is represented as his source of power:

Gertrude, looking up and meeting the cold, grey glance, became suddenly conscious that her hat was shabby, that her boots were patched and clumsy, that the wind had blown the wisps of hair about her face. What was there in this man’s gaze that made her, all at once, feel old and awkward, ridiculous and dowdy; that made her long to snatch up her heavy camera and flee from his presence, never to return? (107)

Gertrude here feels objectified, though she gains confidence in subsequent meetings, later meeting him ‘almost with open defiance’ (131). During their final confrontation when Gertrude travels to his house at night to rescue Phyllis, the gaze plays a central role in their battle:

Gertrude turned and faced him.

His face was livid with passion; his prominent eyes, for once wide open, glared at her in rage and hatred.

Gertrude met his glance with eyes that glowed with a passion yet fiercer than his own.

Elements, long smouldering, had blazed forth at last. Face to face they stood; face to face, while the silent battle raged between them.

Then with a curious elation, a mighty throb of what was almost joy, Gertrude knew that she, not he, the man of whom she had once been afraid, was the stronger of the two. For one brief moment some fierce instinct in her heart rejoiced. (172)

Realising he had lost, ‘Darrell ... dropped his eyes’ (172). Gertrude, who, together with Lucy, is a professional producer of images, has a capacity to challenge the power of Darrell’s gaze in a way Phyllis cannot.

The characters of *The Romance of a Shop* are, despite their sometimes feminist aspects, remarkably conventional: the smart, unattractive and determined Gertrude; the unintelligent but beautiful and naïve Phyllis; the old-fashioned Fanny; the aristocratic, snobbish, Aunt Caroline; and not least the lecherous and powerful seducer, Sidney Darrell (Beckman, *Amy Levy* 156). The narratives are similarly formulaic: orphaned young women must struggle to survive in a new world, romances will occur, colonial wars will feature, a young woman will tragically die, and marriages will conclude the novel. Letters show that Levy herself did not think *The Romance of a Shop* to be a particularly serious novel. She writes apologetically to Vernon Lee:

I am working hard, correcting proofs & writing. I think there is some stuff in the novel on wh. I am at work [*Reuben Sachs*], but I don’t much care for the other one—wh. is slight & aims at the *young person*. You mustn’t pitch into me about it—it fills its own aims, more or less, & I have purposely held in my hand. (emphasis original, Letter 32 268)

Further, Levy writes to her sister Katie that though the reviews ‘continue mildly good’, she does not much care for them except for sale purposes as ‘they are evidently written by fools’ (Letter 33 *Amy Levy* 270). Though the plot of *The Romance of a Shop* is, as a reviewer in *The Academy* wrote, ‘not new’ (Saintsbury 302), its gender and colonial tropes are enacted in arguably self-reflexive and satirical ways. Jusová, following Beckman, examines the ironic deployment of colonial tropes in *The Romance of a Shop*: ‘In an ostensibly formulaic way, the British colonies represent in Levy’s novel the margins of the text’s world in which certain characters can be relegated and from which others unexpectedly emerge just as the narrative requires it’ (146). Suitors and

potential suitors for the sisters come and go from margins and Empire to come and go from the margins of the narrative. As Jusová notes, the only ‘customary colonial subplot missing is a Lorimer brother returning from America at an opportune moment when the sisters need him most’ (146). Twice in *The Romance of a Shop*, Levy draws attention to her exaggerated use of colonial tropes. The first occurs when Edward Marsh comes back from Australia, newly wealthy, to marry Fanny. After Frank displays surprise that the news of nuptials concerned Fanny and not another sister, Phyllis chides him, saying that: “‘It is quite a romance . . ., she and Mr. Marsh wanted to be married ages and ages ago. But he was too poor, and went to Australia. Now he is well off, and has come back to marry Fan, like a person in a book. A touching tale of young love, is it not?’” (139). Frank then ‘severely’ ignores ‘the note of irony’ in Phyllis’s voice, displeased that a woman should show such a cynical relationship to sentiment (139). He is pleased, however, when Lucy goes on to inform him that “‘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” (139). The second occurrence is when news comes that Frank (who is now Lucy’s fiancé) and his regiment who are stationed in Africa, had been slaughtered (161-163), and Fanny declares that: “‘People always come back in books” (163). The irony of Fanny’s reference here to fiction rather than reality is heightened by the fact that her own husband had just returned unharmed from a colonial outpost.

Jusová theorises that Levy’s use of white, genteel heroines in *The Romance of a Shop* is a strategy of reader-identification that, when the conventionality is exaggerated to irony, undermines the hegemony of the identities and discourses represented:

Levy’s preference for genteel heroines and for the concerns of the genteel 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 ... reach the intended audience, and to express (in a more or less coded way) a certain level of contempt for these conventions and concerns. (Jusová 147)

Throughout Levy's career she sought to challenge contemporary and historical modes of cultural representation. Here, in *The Romance of a Shop*, she undermines the representative premise of Victorian realism by drawing attention to its artificiality through parodic exaggeration and irony.

Before discussing the ending to *The Romance of a Shop*, which has been criticised for its conventionality, I turn back to an earlier (and more depressing) short story of Levy's, 'Euphemia: A Sketch' (1880) to illuminate the choices ultimately made for the novel's conclusion. While *The Romance of a Shop* operates in a realist mode insofar as its narrator is relatively omniscient (see Wanczyk), 'Euphemia: A Sketch' features an intensely ambivalent female protagonist, Euphemia or "Miss Effie", as her life is narrated and imperfectly understood by a man of her infrequent acquaintance, Dr. H. The technique employed in Part One of 'Euphemia', wherein the (male) narrator fails to comprehend the protagonist's protestations, is a representational strategy Levy uses with more clarity and to more effect in the unpublished 'The Doctor' and the much shorter 'Cohen of Trinity' (see Chapter Three). Dr. H meets Euphemia as a 'rather pathetic' ten year old reciting Sir Walter Scott's tale of Lochinvar, 'Marmion', at a Variety Show. She becomes the dying charge of her uncle Augustus Corbould. According to Augustus, Euphemia's father had:

hampered himself with an imprudent marriage; he fell in love with a Jewess in Boston, and married her secretly when he was only nineteen. She was the daughter of Rabbi, and never brought him a penny. Later on the child was born. ... The pair had fine notions of earning their bread by teaching and lecturing and keeping little Euphemia, as they called her, away from the stage. Poor things!

When Cholera broke out in New Orleans, where they'd gone for a few months in the summer after the child was born, they were both down with it. Dick sent to me when he was dying, told me about the marriage, and how he'd meant to tell me as soon as they'd begun to get on a bit in the world. I reckon he'd have to wait sometime... (132)

In Levy's wider work, scholars and intellectual pursuits are represented nobly; the fact that Euphemia's parents were scholars makes them sympathetic characters. Like Judith's parents in *Reuben Sachs*, Euphemia's parents have chosen intellectual and moral integrity over financial or social aspiration. After their death Euphemia is sent to Augustus and is used as an 'infant phenomenon' on stage in a touring Variety show. Euphemia's story has striking resemblances to that of Mirah's in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. Both characters are made to work in the theatre by father figures and their associations with the public, low culture, and money, compromises their sense of self. But whereas Mirah is, if anything, infantilised by her experiences, Euphemia instead develops a perceptive (if cynical) understanding of the world. Her experiences have made her weary and wary, giving Euphemia critical faculties and self-reflexivity that Mirah never demonstrates. Mirah narrowly escapes being sold into prostitution via her father's deal with the Count, and finds much sympathy with Daniel and Mrs Meyrick. Conversely, when, at age sixteen and upon their second meeting, Euphemia relays to Dr. H how she has experienced life, she is met with misunderstanding. Dr H. is incredulous when Euphemia tells him that she is worn out and tired; to which she responds 'You forget [...] what my life has been; that I was pulled open by impatient hands, that would not wait for me to develop' (136). After Dr. H affects not to grasp her meaning, she continues that 'My uncle found it convenient for him that I should be "domestic": -- well you're a man, and perhaps do not realize what that means. I had begun life (like most other people) with great hopes, great beliefs, great aims' (136). Going on with her story, Euphemia recounts that she spent 'two years – so dark that I

cannot bear to think of them' (137). The embodied language used to describe her exploitation as a young girl and woman associate her time on the stage as an "infant phenomenon" with the broader gendered and sexual exploitation.

In 'Euphemia: A Sketch', Levy first experiments with the narrative strategies of misrecognition and misrepresentation. The narrator, Dr. H, is drawn as paternalistic, well-intentioned, and ultimately ignorant. The reader watches Dr. H misread, mischaracterise, and misjudge Euphemia. When Euphemia tells him of her years growing up in an abusive environment, Dr. H comes back with the following conclusion: 'You think the world a dark place, because you no longer enjoy the excessive praise and applause which you formerly did' (138). As the story goes on to detail Euphemia's scholarly and artistic ambitions, Dr. H's diagnosis of unchecked vanity is revealed as ignorant.

Years pass and upon their next fortuitous meeting, Dr. H discovers that Euphemia has become a successful playwright and actress. But Levy ends the story with Euphemia marrying, retiring as a playwright, and moving to the 'young, wild colony' of Iowa. That Euphemia and Frank, her fiancée, plan to move abroad to the adventurous Iowa seems to be a concession for the life of domesticity now imposed upon Euphemia (see Beckman *Amy Levy* 65-6). Of 'Euphemia', Beckman summarises: 'In this story Levy cannot imagine a woman with an artistic nature being fulfilled except through a romantic union, but she is unable to imagine a union that would not require a woman to abandon her artistic aspirations' (66).

Levy's early short story has correlations with the resolution of *The Romance of a Shop*: Deborah Nord describes the novel's ending as resembling a 'cheap *Pride and Prejudice*' ('Neither Pairs' 751), writing that:

After the struggle for independence is essentially won in the novel, Levy cannot sustain it, at least in part because she understands that independence is painful, precarious, and exhausting and because as a fledgling novelist, she shies away from writing the kind of book that will tell an uncomfortable truth. ('Neither Pairs' 751)

Levy did consider this her "commercial book" 'to have the way paved for Reuben' [*Reuben Sachs*] (Letter 33 270), but Levy had already at this point in her career written poems, stories and articles which spoke defiantly against dominant discourses, not least of which is her poem 'Xantippe', published with a collection in 1881, and her series of articles in the *Jewish Chronicle*, which criticised both Gentile and Jewish cultures, and even George Eliot. The problem of the romance plot for female characters (that they must heterosexually couple or die), though, is approached by Levy with compromise and self-reflexivity.

The sisters' photography business is ultimately successful and, by the novel's end, three of the sisters have married and Phyllis has died the 'quintessential Victorian feminine death of consumption' (Evans 38). Levy, however, does not merely marry the three remaining sisters off and have them, after their adventures through independence, lead solely domestic lives. Gertrude's eventual marriage to Lord Watergate is represented as complementary, with her literary inclinations and his scientific ones being reiterated in the novel's epilogue (193) and Gertrude's career as a writer begins (190). Lucy, who marries artist Frank Jermyn with whom she has two children, continues the photography business in new quarters that allows them both their own studio, with the narrator noting that 'the photography, however, has not been crowded out by domestic duties' (193). "Old world" Fanny and Mr Marsh continue 'to flourish at Notting Hill', though without the bearing of children. Lucy privately remarks, however, that this could be for the best, for she does not 'think the Marshes would have understood how to bring up a child' (193), thus signalling an end to the reproduction of

domesticated, traditional femininity. And, although Phyllis dies tragically, her death importantly occurs not as a result of working with her sisters, but from, rather, not working and instead associating with the upper classes. In closure so exhaustive as to surely be parodic, the novel's epilogue ends with three paragraphs detailing the happenings of the Lorimer's former landlords, their former studio, and the 'room's above the umbrella maker's' (194). Nord's distaste with the ending of *The Romance of a Shop* is an example of the feminist criticism Penny Boumelha has deconstructed. She writes that feminist criticism:

tends on the one hand to approach novels for their sociological content – for their depiction of the injustices and abuses suffered by women – but on the other hand it contains a strongly prescriptive strain in its insistence on looking for positive role-models with whom contemporary feminists might expect to identify. The resulting requirement of fantasy heroines in realist textual environments places anachronistic and unanswerable demands upon the possibilities writing mid-nineteenth-century realism. ('On Realism' 326)

Levy, in writing a genre-bending romantic realist novel, is able to present in tandem the two wishes of feminist criticism as presented here by Boumelha: the acknowledgement of gendered discrimination or injustice and the provision of female independence.

In *The Romance of a Shop*, the marriages of Gertrude and Lucy do not end their artistic careers, though neither character is given the emotional complexity or ambition that Euphemia holds. In Levy's prose, happiness is only afforded to simplicity. When characters are represented with rich inner lives and with deep emotional and philosophical yearnings, their narratives continue with compromise or, in the case of 'Cohen of Trinity', they end with death. It is only in Levy's poetry, as the following chapter explores, where some fulfilment is found, even if it is fleeting.

Amy Levy's writings explored in this chapter – 'Women and Club Life', 'Review: Aurora Leigh', 'Eldorado at Islington', 'The Ballade of an Omnibus', 'Captivity', *The Romance of a Shop*, and 'Euphemia: A Sketch' – all interrogate how contemporary conventions of gender are constructed, regulated, and represented. Levy reveals how hegemonic femininity is constructed by showing it is contingent upon location in the upper and middle classes and that by refusing to perform it, women can (in theory) adopt some of the spatial freedoms experienced by working and lower class women. These works show how the exclusion of some women from the public spheres of city travel, clubs, and institutions of politics and business, has not only put women at a great professional and developmental disadvantage, but has rendered unintelligible the women who, through alternate means or defiance, nevertheless do occupy these sites or perform roles and identities not ideologically available to women. It is this ideological denial, continuing into the present day, that has until recently denied Amy Levy's role as an artist of modernity.

## Chapter Two

### ‘All the World is Blind’: Unveiling Same-Sex Desire in the Poetry of

Amy Levy

Amy Levy’s three novels, *The Romance of a Shop*, *Reuben Sachs: A Sketch*, and *Miss Meredith* (a novella), all conform in one way or another to the conventions of the romance plot. In the first, one sister dies a fallen woman while the other three marry. In the second, the cross-class romance is hindered by economic ambition, with Reuben eventually dying and Judith marrying unhappily. In the third, *Miss Meredith*, the cross-cultural and cross-class romance between governess Meredith and Andrea is ultimately successful. In all three of these prose narratives Levy presents exclusively heterosexual romances. Levy’s earlier dramatic monologues follow a similar path; though they challenge the ideology and equity of heterosexual relations, they still operate within the heterosexual romance paradigm. ‘Magdalen’, for example, tells the story of a fallen woman, sick and dying on a pallet-bed, who condemns her sexual partner for a knowing transmission of disease:

All things I can endure, save one.  
.....  
Yea, all things bear, save only this:  
That you, who knew what thing would be,  
Have wrought this evil unto me.  
It is so strange to think on still—  
That you, that you should do me ill!  
Not as one ignorant or blind,  
But seeing clearly in your mind (1; 10-16)

In an act of gendered and religious defiance, the monologue finishes with Magdalen asserting what she would say if she were to see his face once more:

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. (82-85)

‘Magdalen’, though challenging contemporary dominant ideologies of gender, sexuality and Christianity, nevertheless still conforms, like all of Levy’s creative narrative works, to the assumption of heterosexuality. It is only in Levy’s lyric poetry, a mode wherein ambiguity can flourish, that non-heterosexual desire is drawn.

Amy Levy wrote to Vernon Lee in 1887 and told her that ‘You are something of an electric battery to me (this doesn’t sound polite) & I am getting faint fr. want of contact!’ (Letter 28 261). In 2000 Linda Hunt Beckman published the first book-length biography of Amy Levy<sup>9</sup>, which included a collection of her personal letters spanning from Levy’s childhood until her death in 1889. In this chapter I analyse a selection of letters written to Levy’s sister Katie that reference the same-sex romantic desires – or her ‘grand passions’, as she calls them – that Levy felt at Brighton, particularly in relation to her headmistress, Edith Creak. These letters from Levy’s school years also show how her feminist sensibilities were developed as she was presented with alternative non-heterosexual life-paths at Brighton. This chapter is concerned with exploring Levy’s work for its queer possibilities and potential. Following a discussion of the aforementioned letters, I analyse poetry from Levy’s two major collections, *A Minor Poet and Other Verse* and *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse*, reading a selection of poems through a queer framework. However, reading pre-twentieth century texts for female same-sex desire is problematic, as ‘lesbian’ was yet to exist as a culturally coherent or recognisable identity and female sexuality, let alone female homosexual sexuality, scarcely existed in public discourse. As Terry Castle notes in her introduction to *The Apparitional Lesbian*, it is fabled that in 1885 when the

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<sup>9</sup> Christine Pullen would publish a second in 2010.



Criminal Law Amendment Act which outlawed homosexuality in Britain was passed, it was brought to Queen Victoria's attention that although the Act outlawed homosexual relations between men, it did not outlaw such relations between women. Shocked, the Queen replied that 'No woman would ever do that'. Though few people would now go so far as the apocryphal Queen Victoria story in refusing the possibilities of female same-sex desire, searching for and writing about "lesbian" literary history is constantly met with such derealisations and Levy's work is no exception.

Letters from Levy to her sister Katie show Levy with developed, romantic attachments to other women. The letters from Brighton do not mark these desires as particularly extraordinary or deviant; indeed there is reference to Katie (who was by all evidence heterosexual) having had at least one such same-sex crush herself in years past (Letter 6 221). Nevertheless, Levy does describe an attempt to visit her Brighton crush, Edith Creak, as 'bold' (Letter 5 220) and Levy remarks many times of the difference between her feelings of same-sex desire and Katie's. One letter opens with Levy writing 'I utterly despise you! I never did think your passion' (?) worth much and now my suspicions of its spuriousness are confirmed' (Letter 6 221). Without the corresponding letter from Katie to which this is a reply, it is impossible to determine the context of Levy's outpouring, yet it is clear that she feels a sense of betrayal in Katie's dwindled same-sex interest. In a later letter, Levy appears to tease Katie about her opposite-sex desires, when she writes of a man who is an 'awful fool & ignoramus' but tells Katie that because 'he was a real man [...] *you* wd. have honored him' (Letter 8 224). Perhaps the most significant letter, however, is when Levy tells Katie that she envisions that they will now have very different futures to one another, presumably in contrast to the similar futures Levy had previously imagined. This admission comes at the end of a

letter (however, Beckman notes that there was no signature, so perhaps the letter continued), after reflecting on time spent with Miss Creak ('that blessed woman'):

Today that blessed woman mounted guard for 4 hours—so you may imagine my eyes were not bent solely on my paper—She did look sweet—just working mathematics contentedly to Herself. She has flung out minute crumbs of sweetness lately to her wormy adorer, who bagged a divine passion-inspiring—whenever I think-of-it—embrace today at the sanctum door. Frankly I'm more in love with her than ever—isn't it grim? I don't believe it will go for ages; and I can never care for anyone or anything else while it lasts. Don't you like these egotistic outpourings? Of course this is quite confident-like. I make such different future pictures to what I used to—you married maternal, prudent & [illegible] with a tendency to laugh at the plain High School Mistress sister who grinds, lodges with chums and adores 'without return.' (Letter 8 224)

Here Levy positions her future outside of the ideological domain of the patriarchal family by contrasting her future with Katie's hypothetical 'married maternal' one. That this prediction comes after an extended recount of her feelings for Miss Creak, indicates that Levy's potential future as a single, working-woman is motivated not merely or even primarily by a desire for independence, education and professional growth. Rather, Levy here is positioning the family as synonymous with heterosexuality. It is also notable how Levy clearly connects her same-sex desires to a sense of identity. She recognises her romantic desires as contrasting with opposite-sex desires, and identifies from them that a "new" future, with new prospects must therefore follow (see also Francis, 'Amy Levy' 196). Though Levy at no point in any of her other remaining and available letters *explicitly* constructs herself with an alternate "lesbian" sexual identity, in the "pre-lesbian" era in which she lived and wrote, this account can be read as an attempt to construct a realisable alternative to heterosexuality out of the discourses and identities available to her in late nineteenth-century London.

In 1886 Levy met Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) in Florence where Lee was based (Beckman, *Amy Levy* 254-5). Letters reproduced in Beckman's biography show strong

feelings for Lee. Levy writes to Lee of a proposed novel in which Lee is ‘to be not the heroine, but the hero!’, continuing ‘At least he is to have elements of you in his style and composition’ (Letter 30 266). Becoming acquainted with Lee brought Levy into contact with new social circles, among them fellow artists and probable homosexuals (Beckman, *Amy Levy* 132). One such new acquaintance, Dorothy Bloomfield, was likely romantically linked to Levy for a time (Beckman, *Amy Levy* 152).

The first and only long-form queer reading of Levy or her work is Emma Francis’ illuminating ‘Amy Levy: Contradictions? Feminism and Semitic Discourse’, published in 1999. To summarise, Francis analyses the (dis)junctions between Levy’s radical sexual politics and her comparatively conservative racial politics. In gaining access to Levy’s, at this time unpublished, letters, Francis was the first scholar to provide biographical evidence of Levy’s queer sexuality.<sup>10</sup>

As will be discussed further on, Francis reads a collection of Levy’s “queer” poems from *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse* through Terry Castle’s theory of a ghosting formulated in *The Apparitional Lesbian*. Yet, even here, Francis is forced to conclude that:

I hesitate to call the poems in the ‘Love, Dreams and Death’ sequence ‘lesbian’ because they work to interrogate rather than affirm sexuality and sexual identity. ... [H]er later poetry interrogates the process by which mythic, symbolic and identificatory structures are produced. Levy’s later poetry studies subjectivities and forms of experience which become increasingly less locatable, less intelligible within conventional accounts of sexual and social identification. Her explorations of same-sex desire invoke some disquieting images and associations which concentrate more on pain than on pleasure, more on conflict than on consensus. (‘Amy Levy’ 196)

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Bristow’s article, published the same year, makes reference to what was likely to be Beckman’s forthcoming biography (Bristow cites a title different to what the biography was published under in 2000), though does not specifically mention the letters.

She goes on to say that her reservations in deeming this collection of poems ‘lesbian’ stems from their anarchic relationship to sexuality (201). Perhaps it is this anarchism that has prevented other scholars from analysing the queer aspects of Levy’s poetry. Joseph Bristow is, with Francis, a notable exception here. His analysis of ‘Philosophy’, ‘A Wall Flower’, and ‘A Ballad of Religion and Marriage’ recognises the potential same-sex desire of the poems, though expression of sexuality is not the focus of his reading. Scholars since Bristow, Francis, and Beckman have widely acknowledged Levy’s queer sexuality and yet curiously, analyses of Levy’s life and works has produced no more queer readings. This chapter, in its analysis of “lesbian” history and Levy’s poetry, continues the rediscovery of queer history and queer writers.

It is, I concede, difficult to locate lesbian desire in the historical archive. While few people now would take the “Queen Victoria approach” of denying historical lesbian existence altogether, we are still reticent in ascribing lesbian desire directly to any person or text. Yet, albeit with a degree of reservation, I still have to disagree with Francis’ conclusion. Monique Wittig has observed that to be a lesbian inherently produces an opposition not only to the category of ‘woman’ but also to the ideological institutions that define and produce ‘woman’ (13), rendering lesbian ontology – especially in the nineteenth century – less locatable, less intelligible, conflicting and, indeed, sometimes painful. Levy’s poetry is strategically queer in this regard. It is actively navigating how to represent an existence that is almost entirely denied by cultural, legal and linguistic institutions, resulting in a near symbolic annihilation. Ambiguity and liminality, therefore, are tools for entry into a queer symbolic.

The representation of a historical or contemporary figure’s sexuality is more important than mere accuracy of biography. As Adrienne Rich demonstrated in ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, the assumption of

heterosexuality has been a violent presence in women's lives. It excludes and silences women's lived experiences, and robs queer women of a history with which to identify.

Rich observes that:

Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women. But it is more than these, although we may first begin to perceive it as a form of naysaying to patriarchy, an act of resistance. It has, of course, included isolation, self-hatred, breakdown, alcoholism, suicide, and intrawoman violence; we romanticise at our peril what it means to love and act against the grain, and under heavy penalties; and lesbian existence has been lived (unlike, say Jewish or Catholic existence) without access to any knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social underpinning. The destruction of records and memorabilia and letters documenting the realities of lesbian existence must be taken very seriously as a means of keeping heterosexuality compulsory for women, since what has been kept from our knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage, and community, as well as guilt, self-betrayal, and pain. (649)

Because letters and biographical evidence of lesbian sexuality have routinely been destroyed and therefore lesbian lives forgotten, it is even more important to acknowledge lesbian history when it *is* present in the "archive". That some scholars since the availability of Francis' chapter and Beckman's biography, both of which reproduce queer biographical material, still represent Levy as heterosexual, is an act of symbolic violence. As Beckman has argued, there is no evidence that Amy Levy ever had heterosexual feelings, let alone evidence that she had a heterosexual relationship. In response to Christine Pullen's biography, wherein Pullen represents Levy as being in unrequited love with Karl Pearson, Beckman writes that:

When I said Levy had homoerotic desire, I provided ample support, but I did not say that she had no desire for men, just that I could find no evidence for it. ... Since I worked with Levy's surviving papers (plus anything else I could find out about her), met her sister Kate's grandchildren, and corresponded with other relatives, I feel fairly confident that I found what remains of the record. I found nothing about heterosexual impulses. While it did occur to me that there might have been a man in her heart at some point, I found no sign of one. ('A Scholarly Dialogue')

The compulsive prescription of heterosexuality is revealed in Beckman's reply here. One not only, as in Adrienne Rich's theory, needs no evidence to assume heterosexuality, but evidence contrary to heterosexuality as in Levy's case is still not enough to displace its power. This power of institutionalised, compulsory heterosexuality is evident in Pullen's reading and demonstrates the need to actively and creatively acknowledge queer representations and lives wherever possible.

Poems from *A London Plane-Tree* can be read to represent this symbolic annihilation of lesbian desire. The first is 'A Wall Flower', the title of which already positions the speaker as "outside" the represented cultural milieu. This exclusion is heightened by the poem's epigraph:

*I lounge in the doorway and languish in vain  
While Tom, Dick and Harry are dancing with Jane (1-2)*

Read queerly, the speaker is looking at a love-interest as she dances not necessarily with a specific lover (at least, this is not the issue) but that she dances with 'man' as a category. The use of 'Tom, Dick and Harry' colloquially refers to men, all men. It implies, when read queerly, that the speaker is watching Jane enmeshed in the sociality of heterosexuality. The four stanzas of the poem proper then read:

My spirit rises to the music's beat;  
There is a leaden fiend lurks in my feet!  
To move unto your motion, Love, were sweet.

Somewhere, I think, some other where, not here,  
In other ages, on another sphere,  
I danced with you, and you with me, my dear.

In perfect motion did our bodies sway,  
To perfect music that was heard always;  
Woe's me, that am so dull of foot to-day!

To move unto your motion, Love, were sweet;

My spirit rises to the music's beat--  
But, ah, the leaden demon in my feet! (3-14)

Dancing, a cultural activity of heterosexual courtship, is used here as stand-in for what the speaker is unable to intelligibly do — love a woman. In a letter written by Levy to 'Dolly' (Dollie Maitland Radford) in 1884, Levy describes a piece of prose she is working on and what narrative tropes she is employing. Taking jest with a like-minded poet, Levy sarcastically refers to the machinations of her heterosexual romance plot as 'subtle' (Letter 20 244). Beckman observes that this demonstrates Levy's self-awareness of the 'formulaic nature of popular fiction' (*Amy Levy* 244, footnote 3) but it also demonstrates an awareness of the performativity of heterosexual courtship and displays a cynicism towards it. The cynicism present in Letter 20 is presented in 'A Wall Flower' without humour, as the consequences of heterosexual scripts for the speaker are obliquely manifest. The second stanza points to a utopia — 'some other where, not here. / In other ages, on another sphere' — where such desires can be realised, where both their bodies could move and the music could play with perfection. While, as Francis notes, there is a tragedy to Levy's "queer" poems, some, like 'A Wall Flower', also envision, even if momentarily, utopic otherworlds where same-sex desire could exist and signify.

Writing of prose (rather than poetry), Castle has noted of lesbian fiction that it often exhibits an otherworldliness. She writes:

By its very nature lesbian fiction has – and can only have – a profoundly attenuated relationship with what we think of, stereotypically, as narrative verisimilitude, plausibility, or 'truth to life'. Precisely because it is motivated by a yearning for that which is, in a cultural sense, implausible – the subversion of male homosocial desire – lesbian fiction characteristically exhibits, even as it masquerades as 'realistic' in surface detail, a strongly fantastical, allegorical, or utopian tendency. (88)

‘A Wall Flower’ exhibits these queer tendencies described by Castle. The epigraph’s invocation of heterosexuality situates the poem in a speculative mode. The ‘leaden fiend/demon’ (also an otherworldly reference) is that which figuratively renders the speaker immobile, holding her down and foreclosing a realisation of same-sex desire. Read as an exploration of queer symbolics, the leaden fiend/demon is the cultural impossibility of representing lesbian desire in the late nineteenth century.

Eve Sedgwick, in her pioneering study of eighteenth and nineteenth-century male homosocial desire, *Between Men*, argues that women’s activities and bonds which could be described as *homosocial* ‘need not be pointedly dichotomized as against’ *homosexual* activities and bonds between women, writing of the ‘simplicity—the unity—of the continuum between “women loving women” and “women promoting the interests of women”’ (3). Sedgwick argues that in contrast to this, male homosociality and homosexuality have often been dichotomised in the cultural imaginary and cannot be placed so easily on a continuum of relations. A consequence of reinforcing the supposed relative ease of ‘women loving women’ and ‘women promoting the interests of women’ is the desexualisation of lesbians and lesbian desire. In a 2015 online discussion of queer spaces on feminist website *xoJane*, some heterosexual women expressed that they enjoy going to gay bars to dance because in queer spaces they are free from heterosexual male harassment. In response, queer commentator Leah Zander succinctly revealed and problematised this erasure of queer space: ‘Gay bars are not desexualized paradise islands that exist for straight women to dance in’. Zander is frustrated that few heterosexual women were able to conceptualise gay bars as a *sexualised* space for queer women, or, following on, able to conceptualise queer women as sexual. Western society still struggles to imagine lesbians as autonomous sexual subjects. Castle, too, feels this cultural apprehension:



It was impossible, the rumor went, that a woman of the 1820s could have had such a rambunctious and enjoyable sex life: *women just didn't do that then*. Yet lurking behind this assumption, I think, was another: that they don't do it now either. Even among some feminist historians, paradoxically, one could detect this morbid refusal to visualize – as if lesbianism and “not doing it” were somehow perversely synonymous. (emphasis original, *The Apparitional* 11)

This refusal erases the pleasures, desires, and agencies of lesbian women. Castle writes that she has ‘tried to maneuver around this rather more insidious and ascetical kind of denial by focusing whenever possible on the embodied and erotic aspects of lesbian experience’ (11). It is significant, therefore, to recognise and acknowledge the carnality of Levy’s poetry and to welcome the queer potential of Levy’s sexual and sensual depictions of female lovers in her poetry.

In Levy’s posthumously published poem ‘A Ballad of Religion and Marriage,’ she foresees a time when women’s lives and identities will not be determined by their marriage-status. The final stanza of the poem reads:

Grant, in a million years at most,  
Folks shall be neither pairs nor odd—  
Alas! we sha’n’t be there to boast  
‘Marriage has gone the way of God!’ (25-28)

The critique of marriage here, while most obviously occurring from a critique of gendered relations, also potentially envisions a time when, as one of the most significant rituals of heterosexuality, marriage will cease to ostracise non-heterosexual persons. While ‘odd’ is often conceptualised in relation to George Gissing’s 1893 novel *The Odd Women* and the “problem” of “surplus women”, Castle also notes that ‘odd’ has been used by same-sex attracted women to describe themselves as early as Anne Lister in the 1820s (*The Apparitional* 10).

Another queer tactic Levy employs is to do away with gender altogether as in ‘Philosophy’; in which the speaker recalls a summer spent with a ‘dear friend’ (27),

when they would stay up ‘talking half the night’ (14), high above on the ‘stairway’s topmost height’ (13) gazing ‘on the crowd below’ (15), the ‘philistine and flippant throng’ (8). Here, in youth, they were ‘Scarce friends, not lovers (each avers), / But sexless, safe Philosophers’ (25-26). Sharing here a relationship that is “above” gender, the speaker also notes that not only does gender dissolve between the pair but their individuated subjectivities do as well: ‘For, you and I, we did eschew / The egoistic “I” and “you;”’ (19-20). Joseph Bristow notes of this poem that the sex of both speaker and friend is ‘teasingly obscure’ and he proposes a resistant reading to the poem’s ‘structures of denial’, suggesting that ‘Their scornful pride – setting themselves above the Philistines – may well have masked their amorous interest in each other’ (‘All Out of Tune’ 85). Bristow goes on to explore the frustration evident in Levy’s writings:

True to its title, ‘Philosophy’ poses a philosophical problem: the possibility of imagining desires – either ‘sexless’ or indeed between the same sex – inconceivable to the ‘flippant throng’ below. And it is here, I think, that one glimpses the subtle but frustrated erotic dissidence of Levy’s writing. (‘All Out of Tune’ 86)

The frustration of sex here can also be read, as Bristow suggests, as a frustration of sexuality. As Castle points out, the unintelligibility of the lesbian is due in part to her disengagement from men and therefore from patriarchy:

Western civilization has for centuries been haunted by a fear of ‘women without men’—of women indifferent or resistant to male desire. Precisely because she challenges the moral, sexual, and psychic authority of men so thoroughly, the “Amazon” has always provoked anxiety and hatred. As the lesbian philosopher Monique Wittig has put it, “The refusal to become (or to remain) heterosexual always meant to refuse to become a man or a woman, consciously or not. For a lesbian this goes further than the refusal of the *role* ‘woman.’ It is the refusal of the economic, ideological, and political power of a man.” Under the circumstances it’s perhaps no wonder that so many men (and some women) have sought to see the lesbian ‘disappeared.’ By refusing to undergo the symbolic emasculation that Western society demands of its female members—indeed depends upon—the woman who desires another woman has always set

herself apart (if only by default) as outlaw and troublemaker. (*The Apparitional* 5)

Therefore, the over-association – made by Sedgwick, Vicinus and others – between lesbians and feminist heterosexual women ignores the extent to which ‘woman’ is defined by and through patriarchal power relations which are dependent on heterosexuality for their operation. The contemporary Western construction of femininity is contingent upon heterosexuality for its operation. As Castle notes, when a decision was brought towards the parliament in 1921 to make homosexual acts between women illegal in Great Britain (it was already illegal between men), the members of the House of Lords decided against criminalisation not because lesbian sexual activity was too insignificant to bear mentioning, but because it was too terrifying to bear utterance (*The Apparitional* 6). Castle describes one of the comments made by a Minister thus: ‘Lesbianism was a terrible danger, one warned, because it “sapped the fundamental institutions of society,” destroyed marriages and families, and caused the race to decline’ (240, footnote 5). Where scholars such as Deborah Epstein Nord have read Levy’s same-sex desires as indicative of intense female homosociality rather than female homosexuality, they have failed to acknowledge or accommodate Levy’s own refusal to identify with heterosexuality and also ignored the specificity of her refusal to conform to available and dominant forms of Victorian womanhood.

The quest in ‘Philosophy’ for a sexless society performs the same symbolic refusal of patriarchy that the existence of the lesbian does in the Castle’s formulation. By contrast, ‘A Wall Flower’ concedes to its social reality by positioning its speaker as barred from the social situation in which she finds herself, removed the activities and desires displayed before her. She is unable or unwilling to engage in the heterosexual cultural practices and action of the poem and is left to languish in the liminality of the

doorway. 'Philosophy' moves one step further, recounting a time and space, even if unrecognised by wider society, where ideologies could slip and bodies could merge.

The next poem which explores the symbolic impossibility of lesbian desire is 'At a Dinner Party'. Only two stanzas long, it reads:

With fruit and flowers the board is deckt,  
The wine and laughter flow;  
I'll not complain--could one expect  
So dull a world to know?

You look across the fruit and flowers,  
My glance your glances find.--  
It is our secret, only ours,  
Since all the world is blind.

Here the scene describes same-sex love not expected or acknowledged by the wider world. Indeed, the world is 'blind' to their love which is 'secret'. While like Levy's other Sapphic poems, 'At a Dinner Party' conspicuously eludes gendering the speaker (and additionally here, of the love interest), a queer reading of this poem is supported by the doubled reference to fruit and flowers over which the loving glances are exchanged; both objects being commonly gendered as feminine.

A poem from Levy's earlier collection of poetry, *A Minor Poet and Other Verse*, also included references to love which is secret and which eludes literal physical intimacy. This is 'Sinfonia Eroica', dedicated in brackets to Sylvia. The title references Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony No.3* of the same name, which is notable for the funeral march of the second movement. Levy was obviously aware of the cultural valency of its funeral march, referring in the poem to a 'mystic melody of death' (30). The poem is addressed to the lover featured, opening 'My lover, my lover' (1) as the speaker recalls an evening in June when both persons happened to frequent the same music hall, where a 'high magician' (5) can 'draw the dreams from out the secret breast' (7). Soon after arriving the speaker sees her love interest:

I, with the rest,  
Sat there athirst, atremble for the sound;  
And as my aimless glances wandered round,  
Far off, across the hush'd, expectant throng,  
I saw your face that fac'd mine. (9-13)

As can be seen, similarly to 'At a Dinner Party', the soon-to-be object of the speaker's love is encountered from a distance — space and people exist between them, and they are unable to *be* or converse together openly. The poem continues:

Clear and strong  
Rush'd forth the sound, a mighty mountain stream;  
Across the clust'ring heads mine eyes did seem  
By subtle forces drawn, your eyes to meet.  
Then you, the melody, the summer heat,  
Mingled in all my blood and made it wine.  
Straight I forgot the world's great woe and mine;  
My spirit's murky lead grew molten fire;  
Despair itself was rapture.  
Ever higher,  
Stronger and clearer rose the mighty strain;  
Then sudden fell; then all was still again,  
And I sank back, quivering as one in pain. (14-26)

Here, unlike the two poems examined earlier, there is a form of consummation. It is impossible to read these lines without a sexual, orgasmic subtext, compounded by the poem's closing lines 'And I knew / Not which the sound, and which, O Love, was you' (38-39). Like in the connected poem that follows in *A Minor Poet*, 'To Sylvia', this poem associates bodily experiences with music. While the speaker's spirit grows hot as 'molten fire', her despair becomes rapturous and "the strain" becomes stronger and clearer, before ending suddenly leaving her 'quivering as one in pain.' 'Sinfonia Eroica' is, quite clearly, not a poem about female friendship or mother-daughter-like emotional bonds. The "problem" of pre-1900 lesbian representation is partially eclipsed here through associating lesbian sex with, and exploring it through, music – a form of expression and representation that operates outside of linguistic signification. As

George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel noted in his *Aesthetik*, music, like poetry, strives to affect mood and the senses, rather than striving to represent an imaginative concept or an objective reality (226-231). Arthur Schopenhauer similarly writes that ‘[Music] stands quite apart from all the others. In it, we do not perceive an imitation or a copy of some idea of the things that exist in the world’ (Schopenhauer 218). Music, unlike most written or visual art, does not purport to be a signifier of an objective signified. Music, therefore, is an apt theme for a nineteenth-century lesbian poem. Both music and lesbianism have troubled relationships to the symbolic order, yet exist and express regardless. If a lesbian sexual relationship is not culturally intelligible, not able to be “objectively” rendered through conventional representation, then representing the feeling of orgasm through music is an alternate strategy of queer representation.

And yet, even here in this orgasmic poem, not only is the object and source of the desire out of reach, but the desire itself is associated with death. A preoccupation with death (including in relation to sexuality) would come to feature heavily in Levy’s final poetry collection, *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse*. While the music allows Levy opportunity to explore sexual desire in ‘Sinfonia Eroica’, the particular choice of symphony, Beethoven’s *Symphony No.3* – with its celebrated funeral march – infuses the poem with a tragic undertone. Sadness and loss, as a cursory glance at iconic lesbian representations will reveal, is part of the collective queer story. In Heather Love’s study of queer literary representation from the late-nineteenth century onwards, *Feeling Backwards*, she pays ‘particular attention to feelings such as nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, *ressentiment* [resentment or hostility], passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness’ (italics original 4). Love argues that these feelings emerge from a historical “impossibility” of same-sex desire. She notes of her queer literary examples that ‘these texts do have a lot to tell us, though: they

describe what it is like to bear a “disqualified” identity, which at times can simply mean living with injury – not fixing it’ (4). The sadness and loss evident in Levy’s poetry can be read then as a representation of the inevitable pain of the historical queer subject.

It is evident, as Francis notes, that many of the Sapphic poems from *A London Plane-Tree* concern themselves with death, loss and pain. As shall be discussed, in addition to Love’s study, Castle has noted the long history of literary “lesbian ghosts” and the simultaneous impossibility and omnipresence that the lesbian-as-ghost evokes; however, beginning with an examination of ‘Borderland’, it is also evident that Levy explores states of liminality other than those between life and death, finding in these inarticulate times and spaces, as Kate Flint has noted (694), opportunities for transgressive feelings and behaviours. To exist partially or wholly outside of the contemporary discourses and ideologies and to elude recognition is, as *Feeling Backwards* attests, a painful experience, yet in these slippages and misperformances of identity, opportunity for subversion resides.

Levy’s final poetry collection also featured numerous roundels, a short three stanza poetic form brought from French into British poetry by Algernon Swinburne. Alex Goody’s analysis of Levy’s late poetry has shown how Levy, particularly in her depiction of the modern city, depicts transitory, fleeting encounters and celebrates liminality (‘Passing’). Elizabeth Ludlow, in an important re-evaluation of the roundel as a poetic form, has demonstrated how Levy and Christina Rossetti used the form to engage ‘with the changing visual epistemology of late-Victorian Bloomsbury’ and to represent a new modernist consciousness (83). In Levy’s ‘Straw in the Street’, ‘The hurrying people go their way’; they ‘Pause and jostle and pass and greet’. The use of contrasting verbs in the second quoted line (one cannot simultaneously pause and jostle nor pass and greet) creates slippage in signification. The London characters of the poem

are then necessarily fragmented and ephemeral. The poem closes, ‘For life, for death, are they treading, say / Straw in the street?’, again slipping from certainties. Alex Goody writes of ‘The Straw in the Street’ that ‘The city street, a place of fleeting encounters and transition and motion, is also, this poem suggests, the liminal space beyond life: the loss of stable identity that the city offers may also be the complete loss of self’ (‘Passing’ 167). The breakdown of identity and subjectivity that Goody finds in Levy’s urban poetry is, particularly for a queer subject in the nineteenth century, a form of liberation.

As Bristow has noted, Levy’s “Sapphic” poems curiously and strategically withhold the gender of the speaker (‘All Out of Tune’ 88), which has led some readers to gender the speaker as male, thus making the poems in question conventionally heterosexual. Alex Goody, for example, stipulates that ‘Levy expresses the experience of the city, so crucial to her late work, through male personae’ (‘Passing’ 165). Interested in the liminality frequently present in Levy’s urban poetry, Goody argues that Levy seeks ontology outside or between identity categories. Such a project, Goody notes, can be fraught:

Poems such as ‘In the Mile End Road’ reveal the double-edged nature of Levy’s writing/passing, of her celebration of the space between. The articulation of transgressive racial and sexual identities—of being neither one nor an other—leads to a splitting of subjectivity into disparate fragments. The text is enunciated in the action of traversing and thereby delineating the liminal space between the posed fragments of identity, but the becoming-subject cannot keep circulating, keep passing between; at some point, the self is sacrificed, destroyed as the Other. The idealized ‘smooth’ space that Deleuze and Guattari describe in *A Thousand Plateaus* and elsewhere, which does not have separation, capture, territorialisation, or designation, is perhaps what Levy’s *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse* is seeking, but what the poems show is that this ideal is a figuration that cannot be maintained. (‘Passing’ 175)

This reading aligns with Levy’s self-avowed literary interests, as her essay on James Thomson attests.



The unintelligibility and non-recognition of female same-sex desire, the failure to ‘separate’, ‘capture’, ‘territorialize’ or ‘designate’, though, could also be read as a queer strategy *of* representation. Where Goody reads the themes of death and loss in Levy’s “Sapphic” poems as a psychoanalytically narcissistic dissolution of the self, in a beloved-as-self model, they can also be read as politically queer, as acknowledging that which socially, culturally, legally and politically could not be acknowledged, represented, or brought into discursive being. Castle has noted that due to its challenge to patriarchal paradigms, ‘it is perhaps not surprising that at least until around 1900 lesbianism manifests itself in the Western literary imagination primarily as an absence, as chimera or *amor impossibilia*—a kind of love that, by definition, cannot exist (*The Apparitional* 30-1). While Goody concedes this representational impossibility and acknowledges the liberatory potential of a Deleuzian refusal of identity politics, he does not explore in depth the redemptive potential of derealised lesbianism. In this respect, it is worth quoting Castle at some length:

A ghost, according to *Webster’s Ninth*, is a spirit believed to appear in a ‘bodily likeness.’ To haunt, we find, is ‘to visit often,’ or ‘to recur constantly and spontaneously,’ ‘to stay around or persist,’ or ‘to reappear continually.’ The ghost, in other words, is a paradox. Though nonexistent, it nonetheless *appears*. Indeed, so vividly does it appear—if only in the ‘mind’s eye’—one feels unable to get away from it. ... What of the spectral metaphor and the lesbian writer? For her, one suspects, “seeing ghosts” may be a matter—not so much of derealisation—but of rhapsodical embodiment: a ritual calling up, or *apophrades*, in the old mythical sense. The dead are indeed brought back to life; the absent loved one returns. For the spectral vernacular, it turns out, continues its own powerful and perverse magic. Used imaginatively—repossessed, so to speak—the very trope that evaporates can also solidify. In the strangest turn of all, perhaps, the lesbian body itself returns: and the feeble, elegiac waving off—the gesture of would-be exorcism—becomes instead a new and passionate beckoning. (*The Apparitional* 46-7)

In much of Levy’s Sapphic poetry there is a “no-thereness” attached to the love-interest, whether it be in the form of a dead love, a lost love, or a love that literally cannot be

reached. Yet, there is also a deep carnality to Levy's Sapphic poetry. Take, for instance, 'Borderland', where, as the speaker lies in bed unsure whether she is waking or sleeping, she is 'aware [o]f an unseen presence hovering' that 'is she', 'sweet as love, as soft as death.'

Am I waking, am I sleeping?  
As the first faint dawn comes creeping  
Thro' the pane, I am aware  
Of an unseen presence hovering,  
Round, above, in the dusky air:  
A downy bird, with an odorous wing,  
That fans my forehead, and sheds perfume,  
As sweet as love, as soft as death,  
Drowsy-slow through the summer-gloom  
My heart in some dream-rapture saith,  
It is she. Half in a swoon,  
I spread my arms in slow delight. --  
O prolong, prolong the night,  
For the nights are short in June!

'Borderland' takes place in the early hours of the morning between night and day, when only faint light pierces the darkness, making shapes visible only in uncertain fluidity. The opening line also positions the speaker between sleeping and wakefulness, in an indeterminate space between the unconscious desires of dreams and their circumscription in reality. Here, in the pre-dawn hours, the speaker's love – 'It is she' – appears to her, swooning. Again the presence of desire conjures death explicitly – 'As sweet as love, as soft as death'. Unlike in 'Sinfonia Eroica' where sexual intimacy is represented orgasmically through music, here two dashes signify the failure to represent climax. Though it is worth noting that 'Borderland' does share with 'Sinfonia Eroica' the use of 'rapture' to describe feelings of sexual pleasure, with its etymological legacy of connoted forceful transportation, it positions the same-sex-oriented sexual pleasure as not only transcendental but inescapable.

Lesbian couplings radically undermine patriarchal networks of power by rendering man obsolete and (re)positioning women independently of men and the family. Thus, where towards the end of the nineteenth century male homosexuality was publicly condemned, female homosexuality was escaping legal and, for the most part, institutional recognition altogether. Though we know through limited remaining archival material, Anne Lister's diaries being most notable here, that women *did* have sexual relationships with women prior to the emergence of a "lesbian identity" in the twentieth century, attempting to excavate a history of lesbian relationships is fraught from the beginning. Castle observes in her study of historical literary lesbians that 'To try to write the literary history of lesbianism is to confront, from the start, something ghostly: an impalpability, a misting over, an evaporation, or "whiting out" of possibility' (*The Apparitional* 28). With Levy, for example, only a very small portion of her letters have survived. In Levy's will, her letters, papers and copyright were entrusted to Clementina Black but most were ultimately left with Ley's family where they were destroyed (Beckman, *Amy Levy* 285, footnote 15; 306 footnote 58).

Returning again to Levy's scholarship on James Thomson, I suggested in the Introduction that Baudelaire's 'The Painter of Modern Life' can be read as an intertext to Levy's essay on Thomson. Indeed, Levy's essay positions Thomson as a poet of modern life. She writes, 'James Thomson is essentially the poet of mood; he has symbolised, as no poet has done before him, a certain phase of modern feeling, I was going to say modern pessimism, but the word scarcely covers the sense' (502). The city that Thomson conjures 'rises before us, a picture distinct, real in itself, real in the force of its symbolic meaning' (503). Clearly inspired by the Symbolist movement, and pondering how to value and give authority to minor works and poets, Levy postures:

The value of the poem does not lie in isolated passages, in pregnant lines which catch the ear and eye and linger in the memory; it is as a complete conception, as a marvellously truthful expression of what it is almost impossible to express at all, that we must value it. And the truthfulness is none the less that it has been expressed to a great extent by means of symbols; the nature of the subject is such that it is only by resorting to such means that it can be adequately represented. Mood, seen through the medium of such draughtsmanship and painter's skill, is no longer a dream, a shadow which the sunbeams shall disperse, but one side of a truth. (505)

Here, even at such an early stage of her career, Levy is concerned with the possibilities and impossibilities of representation.

In reading Thomson's work, Levy identifies the power of recognition, noting that:

Most of us at some time or other of our lives have wandered in the City of Dreadful Night; the shadowy forms, the dim streets, the monotonous tones are familiar to us; but to those who have never trod its streets, the poet's words can be little else than 'a tale of little meaning tho' the words are strong.' (502)

It is this impossibility of recognition from the wider public of Levy's same-sex orientated erotic desires that causes, as Goody phrased it, 'a splitting of subjectivity into disparate fragments' ('Passing' 175). As Judith Butler has explored at depth throughout her work, this incoherence and unthinkability continues to be an attribute of the queer subject today. Subjective coherence, or identity politics, enable a speaking position through which an effective if limited form of agency can be wrought. To be recognised is to be allowed to speak. Yet this coherence comes at the cost of complexity and too often naturalises and normalises identity. Writing in a proto-lesbian era, Levy's work is valuable for its attempts to negotiate and theorise agency and change despite, or even through, a poetics of misrecognition. It is here, in its poetics and its politics, that Amy Levy produced fine queer work.

## Chapter Three

### ‘The Most Vulgar Desire for Recognition’: Jewish Mis/Representation in Victorian Britain

In 1886 Amy Levy published an article entitled ‘The Jew in Fiction’ in the *The Jewish Chronicle*. Here, to a largely Jewish readership, she wrote:

There has been no serious attempt at serious treatment of the subject; at grappling in its entirety with the complex problem of Jewish life and Jewish character. The Jew, as we know him today, with his curious mingling of diametrically opposed qualities; his surprising virtues and no less surprising vices; leading his eager, intricate life; living, moving, and having his being both within and without tribal limits; this deeply interesting product of our civilisation has been found worthy of none but the most superficial observation. (177)

She notes that *Ivanhoe*’s Rebecca and Isaac of York, and Shakespeare’s Shylock ‘remain to-day the typical Hebrews of fiction’ (176). Though criticisms of antagonistic characters such as Shylock are unsurprising, Levy devotes a lengthy passage of her short article to a critical discussion of George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Upon publication, *Daniel Deronda* was embraced by many Jewish reviewers and readers as a positive, and many said accurate, representation of Jewish life (see Himmelfarb 123-125). Levy concedes it is a ‘sincere and respectful attempt’, but she is nevertheless frustrated by the inflated nobility of Mirah, Daniel and Ezra and states that, with the novel’s proto-Zionist themes, it is ‘no picture of contemporary Jewish life’ (176).

Three years later, in January of 1889, Levy published her own ‘serious treatment’ of post-emancipation Anglo-Jewish life in late-Victorian London: *Reuben Sachs*. It follows the divergent destinies of eponymous twenty-seven year old Reuben – a wealthy Jewish barrister with an ascending career in politics– and that of his cousin

and love-interest, twenty-two year old Judith Quixano. Judith is of “noble” Sephardic Jewish heritage, though her immediate family is poor. She has been taken in by her uncle’s wealthier family and raised with her cousins among the upper classes of the West End’s Reform Judaism. At the beginning of the novel, Reuben experiences and contemplates his love for Judith, though as his political career grows, he ultimately rejects the financially poor Judith for another who, although incredibly wealthy, he does not love. Meanwhile, the beautiful and intelligent though un-inquisitive Judith also marries but to a convert to Judaism, Bertie Lee-Harrison. Judith and Reuben’s extended families are also drawn in the novel, representing a range of responses to and experiences of Judaism, materialism, intellectual and spiritual life. Conservatism, specifically materialism and sexism, is however the rule rather than the exception in Levy’s Anglo-Jewish London.

The novel was received critically by most Jewish periodicals, with many reviewers offended by its portrayal of materialism, vulgarity, and competitive individualism. Additionally, and in the decades since, many critics were (and are) uneasy about the negative stereotypical racial representations in *Reuben Sachs*, with many perceiving the novel as indicative of what Sander Gilman has referred to as Jewish self-hatred. In a particularly damning example, the reviewer for the *Jewish World* wrote that in contrast to Julia Frankau<sup>11</sup>, Amy Levy

is not ashamed of playing the *role* of an accuser of her people. The unpleasant reproach, derived from ornithological observations, which persons in her position incur, has no terrors for her. She apparently delights in the task of persuading the general public that her own kith and kin are of the most hideous types of vulgarity; she revels in the misrepresentations of their customs and modes of thought and she is proud of being able to offer her testimony in support of the anti-Semitic theories of the clannishness of her people and the tribalism of her religion. At least, so we gather from the fact that her peculiarly

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<sup>11</sup> Julia Frankau (1859-1916) published *Dr. Phillips: A Maida Vale Idyll* in 1887 under the pseudonym ‘Frank Danby’.

Hebraic name appears in prominent capitals on both the title page and front cover of her very infelicitous romance. ('The Deterioration' 165)

The charges laid against Levy here, while extreme, are indicative of the early Jewish reception of *Reuben Sachs*. Some Jewish readers felt that not only was the novel anti-Semitic but that Levy was also "betraying" her Jewish heritage and community by making such overtly critical representations available to a Gentile public. Across the Atlantic, a review from *The American Hebrew* found, unlike in the review cited above, redeeming literary qualities in the novel, but it too took issue with the novel's representation of Jewish people and culture. This reviewer suggests the novel's major fault is that Levy (unnecessarily, they argue) made Reuben's character Jewish: 'there are a number of other people in the book called Jews, for no other evident reason than to say ill-natured things about them' ('Literary: Amy Levy' 167). Further, like the *Jewish World*, the North American reviewer writes that 'an antipodal ethnological student reading Miss Levy's novel would infer that all manner of ungraceful and ungracious habits including curiosity were the exclusive property of the Jewish "race"' (167). The review concludes by suggesting that Levy study Judaism if she is to produce any valuable works 'for her coreligionists' in the future (167).

After further literary publications, including a second edition of *Reuben Sachs* in July, Levy died in September of 1889. Levy's suicide seemed to facilitate a more sympathetic reading of *Reuben Sachs*. *The Jewish Standard*, for example, remarked after her death upon the novel's 'acute diagnosis of the spiritual blight that has come over well-fed Judaism' (qtd. In Bernstein, 'Introduction' *Reuben* 12). Israel Zangwill, like many other Jewish readers upon the novel's initial release, was unimpressed with *Reuben Sachs* (Bernstein, 'Introduction' *Reuben* 39). After Levy's death Zangwill grew more sympathetic towards to novel, referring to Levy as a genius and writing that 'she

was accused, of course, of fouling her own nest; whereas what she had really done was to point out that the nest was fouled and must be cleaned out' ('A Ghetto Night' 19). Zangwill would go on to base the protagonist of his 1892 novel *The Children of the Ghetto*, Esther Ansell, on Levy's life and career, paying homage to *Reuben Sachs* and rearticulating Levy's critique of West End Jewry.

The rediscovery of *Reuben Sachs* in the 1980s largely replays its original critical reception, with scholars first addressing the novel's representation of the Jewish peoples and cultures. In 1981 Linda Gertner Zatlín wrote that:

Levy maliciously depicts the Anglo-Jewish community. In addition to portraying late-nineteenth-century acculturated middle-class Jews as gradually yielding to the pressures of assimilation and intermarriage, as grappling unsuccessfully with the issues of conversion and the philosophy by which one should live, Levy shows them to be snobbish materialists. Conjointly, she negatively links her depictions of these Jews to all. (qtd. in Hetherington and Valman 7)

In 1983 Edward Wagenknecht spoke cautiously of *Reuben Sachs*, in his *Daughters of the Covenant: Portraits of Six Jewish Women*, writing that 'it would hardly be an exaggeration to describe the general impression of Jewish character which emerges from this book as hostile' (85). And Melvyn New, who collected and published Levy's novels and some of her poetic, short prose and scholarly work, writes that 'years later, the portraits in *Reuben Sachs* cannot convince many readers that Eliot's condescensions are not more palatable than Levy's stereotypes' (29), and that 'One hundred years after publication, some parts of *Reuben Sachs* still rankle' (30).

Since the mid-1980s, Bryan Cheyette has, largely successfully, re-positioned Levy and *Reuben Sachs* as the beginning of a new trend in Jewish representation of the 1890s, in which so-called "novels of revolt" interrogated the limits of Jewish emancipation in Britain. This contrasted with previous generations of Jewish writers



who had written in what Cheyette calls an apologetic tradition, seeking to demonstrate the compatibility between Jewish life and Protestant English nationalism. He summarises:

The Anglo-Jewish novel of 'revolt' was a term coined in 1927 when Lucien Wold reflected on Anglo-Jewry's official attitude to the Anglo-Jewish novel of the 1880s: 'Revolt was in the air. Amy Levy's *Reuben Sachs* illustrated at once its intensity and its dangers ... Amy Levy and Mrs. Sidgwick had yielded clever studies of Jewish character in *Reuben Sachs* and *Isaac Eller's Money*, but they were too near the familiar caricatures.' In short, the Anglo-Jewish novel of 'revolt' refused to engage in literary apologetics on behalf of Anglo-Jewry's version of morality. In particular, these novels described 'the materialism of the rising Jewish middle classes', an Anglo-Jewish genre which extends at least until Brian Glanville's *The Bankrupts* (1958). In this genre, a Jewish idealist – a persona of the novelist – is represented as an example of a moral Jewish self which opposes official Anglo-Jewry. (260)

As Nadia Valman writes, 'Levy's achievement in *Reuben Sachs* has been recognized in recent years for the audacious challenge she posed to an Anglo-Jewish literary tradition of representing Jews as contented, pious, and obedient citizens' ('Amy Levy' 91). So, by 1992, when Geoffrey Alderman published a history of modern British Jewry, he was therefore able to describe *Reuben Sachs*, although quite hyperbolically, as 'the best and most realistic account we have of the undisguised nepotism and the deep, irreverent materialism of the Jewish middle classes in London in the third quarter of the nineteenth century' (72). Failing to read *Reuben Sachs* as a broader critique of British society and literary representation, Alderman writes that 'Sickened by the accepted standards of the Jewish milieu in which she had grown to adulthood, [Levy] set out to expose this environment in all its ultra-opulent and self-satisfied glory' (73). Here, as in analyses of *Reuben Sachs* by Meri-Jane Rochelson, Emma Francis, and Edward Wagenknecht, the critical reading of the novel assumes it is written in a realist mode. Since the mid-1990s, focus on *Reuben Sachs* has become increasingly interested in historicised readings of its approach to Jewish identity, and scholars have begun to

analyse the novel's narrative and literary techniques (Hetherington and Valman 8). Linda Hunt (later Beckman), writing in 1994, suggests that Levy's dissatisfaction with prior Jewish novels 'may have led her to depart in *Reuben Sachs* from what is now called "classic realism"' (236). In 1996 Cynthia Scheinberg reads the ambiguous narration of *Reuben Sachs* as an attempt to create a neutral (non-Christian and non-Jewish) narrator, which, Scheinberg notes, was ultimately unintelligible in the late nineteenth-century ('Canonizing' 181). Susan Bernstein, the editor of the Broadview publication of the novel, similarly argues for the "double consciousness" of the novel, contending that it performs both an insider and outsider perspective and that these 'overlapping gazes' and its fracturing of voice and narrative anticipate the "inward turn" of modernism ('Introduction' *Reuben* 33). Reading *Reuben Sachs* against a classical realist mode, as these scholars have done, reduces some of the contradictions of the text, revealing layered and more nuanced meanings that productively speak back to Levy's other creative and critical works.

One of the most apparent, and troubling, features of *Reuben Sachs* is the negative, racialised physical descriptions of its Jewish characters. The novel begins with a seemingly omniscient narrator. The first in-depth description of Reuben occurs as he leaves the family home during Chapter Two:

Now as he lingered a moment on the pavement, looking up and down the road for a hansom, the light from the street lamp fell full upon him, revealing what the darkness of his mother's drawing room has previously hidden from sight.

He was, as I have said, of middle height and slender build. 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. (59)

It is significant that Reuben is not described earlier, when first we are introduced to him within the domestic, Jewish space. Rather, Reuben is “revealed” by the outside, Gentile world as a racialised Other. He has just returned from the Antipodes, where he had travelled to revive his health: ‘a case of over-work, of over-strain, of nervous breakdown, said the doctors’ (56). It is reiterated to us that the doctor had told Reuben that ‘More than half of my patients are recruited from the ranks of Jews’, and that they ‘pay the penalty of too high a civilization’ (56). It is unclear at this point what distance there exists here between the narrator and his/her problematic descriptions, the text, and Levy herself.

Nevertheless, from the novel’s outset Levy is playing with representational forms. The epigraph to Chapter One, ‘This is my beloved Son’ from Matthew 3.17, literally frames the narrative within Christian constructs. The novel proper then begins, ‘Reuben Sachs was the pride of his family’ (55). The juxtaposition between the Christian epigraph and the novel’s opening line creates ironic distance within the text. By rewriting Mark 3:17 but with the recognisably Jewish name of Reuben Sachs, Levy reveals the inadequacy of Christian epistemology to represent Anglo-Jewish experiences. *Reuben Sachs* both depicts hitherto under-represented experiences of London’s Anglo-Jewish communities, and critiques nineteenth-century representational forms. As Chapter Two explored how Levy’s lyric poetry challenged possibilities of queer representation, this chapter examines how Levy represents and contests available modes of representing and realising Anglo-Jewish life in the late nineteenth-century.

We know from Levy’s 1883 ‘James Thomson: A Minor Poet’ that she was suspicious of the existence of universal truth and was interested in the mechanics of, and value in, representing that which is “not true”: ‘He [Thomson] dwells on a view of things which is morbid, nay false, which does not exist for the perfectly healthy human

being' (502). In this case Levy is referring to a form of depression, what it means to walk the 'City of Dreadful Night', because she knows that 'to those who have never trod its streets, the poet's words can be little else than "a tale of little meaning tho' the word are strong"' (502). This valuing of restricted meaning is carried forward in her 1886 article for *The Jewish Chronicle*, 'Jewish Humour', where she discusses, amongst other things, the poetry and talents of Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), a Jewish poet and writer who converted to Protestantism in mid-life and evidently was a large influence on Levy.<sup>12</sup> Here, as Cynthia Scheinberg has acutely observed, Levy alludes to (and critiques) the Christian universalism of Matthew Arnold through her discussion of Heine.

In Matthew Arnold's essay, 'Heinrich Heine', first published in *The Westminster Review* in 1856, Arnold commends Heine for his "insider" Jewish perspective, writing that 'Heine shows us his own people' (46). Appraising his poetics, Arnold writes that 'By his perfection of literary form, by his love of clearness, by his love of beauty, Heine is Greek; by his intensity, by his untamableness, by his "longing which cannot be uttered," his is a Hebrew' (44). "Hebraism", for Arnold, has 'no literal meaning in contemporary history, and so the term ... is always figurative, abstracted and idealized' (Scheinberg, 'Canonizing' 184). In this typology, Arnold is able to claim Heine as a great poet. In his typological reading of the Old Testament, and by transforming *Jewish* identity into *Hebrew* identity, Arnold 'can claim Hebrew history and the voices of that history in the Jewish Scriptures, while nevertheless disclaiming the value and authority of ongoing, contemporary Jewish identity' (Scheinberg,

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<sup>12</sup> Levy spent time in the British Reading Room translating Heine's poetry. Eleanor Marx said that 'There are many good writers who have tried their hand at translating Heine's *Lieder*. Amy was the best of them; she showed me a number of translations, but left in print only a single translation of a Heine poem (qtd. Bernstein *Roomscape* 63). Heine also appears in many of Levy's creative works, such as the epigraph to Chapter Eighteen of *The Romance of a Shop*, and Levy's poem, 'After Heine'.

‘Canonizing’ 183). This typological reading, by deliteralising the Hebrew Bible, in turn removes the authority and possibility of a Jewish exegesis (Scheinberg, ‘Canonizing’ 184).

Here Heine is Hebraic, where by the essay’s conclusion he is repositioned through Matthew 22:14 as lacking Christianity and therefore, in Arnold’s system, canonicity:

Heine had all the culture of Germany; in his head fermented all the ideas of modern Europe. And what have we got from Heine? A half-result, for want of moral balance and of nobleness of soul and character. That is to say, there is so much power, so many seem able to run well, so many give promise of running well; so few reach the goal, so few are chosen. *Many are called, few chosen.* (emphasis original 52)

Arnold ends the essay on an ambivalent note because, as Scheinberg astutely asks ‘how to claim this non-Christian writer as eternally valuable, when in a Christian epistemology, the contemporary Jew has no eternal value?’ (‘Canonizing’ 186).

Scheinberg writes of this concluding passage that ‘Arnold recasts his ostensibly historically and nationally specific analysis of Heine’s value in an ahistoricized, Christian moral, and theological realm’ (‘Canonizing’ 187).

Arnold’s ambivalent relationship to Heine is mirrored in ‘Leopold Leuniger: A Sketch’, an unpublished story of Levy’s written in 1880 while he was a student at Newnham College, Cambridge (Beckman ‘Leaving’ 186). It is also the first known iteration of the Leopold Leuniger character; he appears again in *Reuben Sachs* and ‘Cohen of Trinity’. The story features Jewish student Leopold and his friendship with the non-Jewish student Gerald. While both young men are from wealthy families, Gerald is from “old money” and is the son of an Earl, while Leopold is ‘a rich Jew in the city whose father had bought old gold and silver, and given the best price for artificial teeth’. The narrator makes this distinction between the characters to signal that

although they have a ‘long and close intimacy’, there also lay between them ‘the widest of social gaps’. Further, in perhaps allusion to Matthew Arnold, Gerald is described as ‘no long-haired radical aristocrat, who talked socialism and flirted with all the nine muses’. Rather, he ‘was a clear-headed, straight-forward English gentleman, with a strong vein of Conservatism underlying the cultured liberality of his nature’. It is significant that Leopold not only identifies with a non-Jewish peer and sociality, but also that the narrator goes to some length to explain how conventional and traditional Gerald is.

Leopold is invited to stay the summer with Gerald and his sister Lilian at their family’s country estate. As Leopold and Gerald first pass through the ‘quaint oak-furnished hall’ together, the narrator remarks that ‘picturesque old houses were quite a new experience to Leo’. After three weeks of sunshine, country and music with Gerald, his sister and his mother Lady Norwood, Gerald’s brother arrives with some friends. After dinner Leopold takes to the verandah to smoke his cigar in solitude away from the small-talk whereupon he overhears the brother’s conversation:

‘The man is a beastly snob – he wants to get into ‘society’, that is all.’

...

‘I think it is a disgrace to society that such people be received. The whole race is a low-born, underbred [illegible] of money [intrigueness]—and this man is the worst of them—this Reuben Saxe—’

Earlier in the story we are informed that Reuben Saxe, as in the later *Reuben Sachs: A Sketch*, is Leopold’s cousin. Hurt by the remarks, Leopold goes to his room and the narrator, following him, observes that:

The dream which he had been dreaming of the last three weeks was now over. ... [The] man was right; he had only said (a little roughly perhaps) what the greater proportion of well-born English men would have said. And he, Leopold Leuniger, what had he been doing? He had no right to be staying in this place—

the people whom he met would have acknowledged him on no other standing than as Sydenham's friend: he was a snob! a trickster?!

He got up and paced the room; the moonbeams fell bright on the familiar objects—the book-shelves, the piano (provided by Sydenham's forethought, with the violin lying on top of it; and on to a table near where lay scattered sheets of 'scores' and a well-worn copy of Heine; Heine the Jew poet; Heine his best-beloved of singers; He sat down by the table and turned over the sheets of music—it seemed a long time ago since he had begun that [getting] of a knowledge of existence.

The distance (if any) between Levy, the narrator, and Leopold is here unclear, however, it is clear that Leopold feels alienated from the people he has previously considered his peers. Beckman writes that 'Levy depicts what happens to Leopold Leuniger as a consequence of his attempt to live his life in accord with the Arnoldian idea that outsiders to English society can be civilized by accepting its superior culture' (*Amy Levy* 71). The years at Cambridge and weeks at the estate with Gerald and his sister, demonstrate Leopold's cultural and artistic achievements. But the conversation overheard reminds Leopold that successful emulation of English culture cannot erase the meanings of Jewishness.

It is significant that Levy chose Heine (a poet she clearly admired) to illustrate her character's internalisation of anti-Semitism. Despite his conversion, and his widely accepted talent, the academy cannot assimilate Heine's poetic achievements into a Christian epistemology and, therefore, cannot fully assimilate him into the canon. The story shares parallels to Levy's life by featuring a Jewish student protagonist who must negotiate his desire for success and acceptance in the Gentile world of Cambridge and London's intelligentsia. An aspiring writer, Levy was likely to have been dismayed and influenced by the reductionist scholarly treatment of Jewish writers like Heine. It is unsurprising, therefore, that he features in one of her earliest fictional studies of Anglo-Jewish life. If literary value is measured, as it is by Arnold, in a Christian framework,

then a “Jewish writer” is necessarily excluded from ever reaching the profession’s highest echelons.

By 1886 when she published ‘Jewish Humour’, Levy had identified and welcomed a potential contemporary Jewish cultural “specificity”: humour. She embraces it as a valid form of artistic expression, and argues for its role in the continuation of Jewish heritage. She notes, like Arnold, that Heine ‘has given perfect expression to the very spirit of Jewish Humour’ (521). She references humour’s connection to pathos, and after surveying a range of humour’s functions, suggests that it is perhaps a more marked quality in Jewish people because of their geographic displacement and generations of urbanism:

If they are more marked in the Jew, let us remember how long it is since he gave up pasturing his flocks and “took (perforce) to trade”; he hardly has left, when all is said, a drop of bucolic blood in his veins. He has been huddled in crowded quarters of towns, forced into close and continual contact with his fellow-creatures; he has learned to watch men’s faces; to read men’s thoughts; to be always ready for his opportunity. If he could raise a laugh at his neighbour’s expense when his neighbour’s demeanour was such a matter of importance to him, who will grudge him the solace and the vengeance? (523)

But, unlike Arnold, Levy subtly regrets that Heine made Jewish humour “available” to a Gentile audience:

The world laughs, and weeps and wonders; bows down and worships the brilliant exotic. We ourselves, perhaps, while admiring, as we cannot fail to admire, indulge in a little wistful, unreasonable regret, for the old cast clouts, the discarded garments of the dazzling creature; for the old allusions and gestures, the dear vulgar, mongrel words; the delicious, confidential quips and cranks which nobody but ourselves can understand. (522)

For she recognises that in a nation’s literature ‘it is no new story’ that ‘the local, the accidental, the particular, should be subordinated to the universal’ (522). Indeed, Heine was excluded from a greater literary appraisal for this reason.



She also, in implicit contrast to Arnold, argues that Jewish humour is not universal:

As far as we can judge we should say, that only a Jew perceives to the full the humour of another; but it is a humour so fine, so peculiar, so distinct in flavour, that we believe it impossible to impart its perception to any one not born a Jew. (523)

By the conclusion of the essay, Levy invokes the Shibboleth from the Hebrew Bible and argues for humour's role as a "modern day" form of cultural continuance: 'If we leave off saying *Shibboleth*, let us, at least, employ its equivalent in the purest University English. Not for all Aristophanes can we yield up our national free-masonry of wit; our family joke, our Jewish Humour' (emphasis original 524). As a model for the practice of Jewish culture, Levy argues that instead of the Shibboleth "test" from the Hebrew Scriptures, whereby the pronunciation of 'Shibboleth' would identify the speaker as Jewish (if pronounced properly) or as not Jewish (if pronounced improperly), her Anglo-Jewish readers should use the 'University English' equivalent: humour. Her use here of 'University English', with a hint of irony, points towards her understanding of the relationships between religion, high culture/education and language, and towards her at times painful existence between, within, and without, both Jewish and Gentile cultural groups of late-Victorian London.

Returning again to *Reuben Sachs*, I argue that the novel's use of Matthew 3:14, Mark 1:11 'This is my beloved Son' as an epigraph comments critically upon a history of Christian typology, whereby Jewish lives and histories are symbolically silenced in order to create a universal Christian epistemology. Levy is implicitly drawing attention to the im/possibilities of representing marginal lives and identities in a culture whose ideological institutions require that marginalisation for their epistemologies to be intelligible. In contrast to the low intellectual value Levy accorded *The Romance of a*

*Shop*, she considered *Reuben Sachs* to have more intellectual integrity (see Beckman, *Amy Levy* 268, 270). If *Reuben Sachs* is read as a commentary on Jewish representation during the Victorian period, then the narrator's apparent anti-Semitism, as shown in the earlier quoted description of Reuben, has the capacity to function as criticism.

The narrator of *Reuben Sachs* is at times seemingly omniscient, able to predict the future (90) and is able to contextualise characters' circumstances, particularly Judith's, with wisdom and sympathy. In significant, yet complex, ways, however, the narrator's authority is also undermined by the narrative. Where, at the beginning of the novel, we observe Reuben from what appears to be an "outside", presumably Gentile, perspective, by the time Bertie Lee-Harrison attends the Day of Atonement, the narrator has shifted and is now aligned to a Jewish perspective, from which it is easy to mock Bertie's ignorance and naivety: 'Bertie stared and Bertie wondered. Needless to state, he was completely out of touch with these people whose faith his search for the true religion had led him, for the time being, to embrace' (98). Following this remark from the narrator, Reuben leads Bertie from the room, showing him towards the door near the end of the evening:

Bertie, who was thoroughly tired out, soon rose to go.

'I will make your excuses up stairs,' said Reuben.

But the polite little man preferred to go to the drawing-room and perform his farewells in person.

'Thanks so much,' he said in the hall, where Leo and Reuben were speeding him.

'I hope you have been edified—that's all.' Reuben laughed.

'I am deeply interested in the Jewish character,' answered Bertie; 'the strongly marked contrasts; the underlying resemblances; the elaborate differentiations from a fundamental type—!'

'Ah, yes,' broke in Reuben, secretly irritated, his tribal sensitiveness a little hurt, 'you will find among us all sorts and conditions of men.' (98)

Here Bertie displays popular contemporary ideas regarding “race”, such as those described by Francis Galton and Josephs Jacobs in the latter’s 1885 article, ‘The Jewish Type, and Galton’s Composite Photographs’. And unlike in the beginning of the novel, where racialised descriptions are presented without reflection by the text, here we are witness to Reuben’s irritation and hurt. Represented as a fetishistic cultural tourist, romanticising Jewish life, Bertie is puzzled by ‘the spirit of indifference, of levity even, which appeared to prevail’ (97) during the performance of religious ritual among the youngest generation. Later on that evening, Reuben’s cousin Leopold remarks of Bertie that ‘I think that he was shocked at finding us so little like the people in *Daniel Deronda*’, to which Esther responds, ‘Did he expect to see our boxes in the hall, ready packed and labelled Palestine?’ (100). Leo concludes, ‘I have always been touched at the immense good faith with which George Eliot carried out that elaborate misconception of hers.’ (100).

Sander Gilman’s work has shown how the historical objectification of Jewish people’s bodies has advanced the ideology of Anglo-British superiority by marking Jewish bodies as different to the “normative” bodies of the Anglo population:

The very analysis of the nature of the Jewish body, in the broader culture or within the culture of medicine, has always been linked to establishing the difference (and dangerousness) of the Jew. This scientific parallel and unequal “races” is part of the polygenetic argument about the definition of “race” within the scientific culture of the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century it is more strongly linked to the idea that some “races” are inherently weaker, “degenerate,” more at risk for certain types of disease than others. In the world of nineteenth-century medicine, this difference becomes labelled as the “pathological” or “pathogenic” qualities of the general representation of the pathophysiology of the Jew. (*The Jew’s Body* 39)

Nadia Valman, building upon Francis’ analysis, has noted how racial degeneration, particularly of Ashkenazi Jewish people, is a theme of the novel. Reuben is drawn in ill health, and his materialist drive narratively comes at the expense of his “racial” values.

In not marrying Judith, the “stronger”, Sephardic Jew, Reuben loses not only the prospect of a love-filled marriage, but also the regeneration of his familial line (Valman, ‘Barbarous’ 114). Though *Reuben Sachs* has an ambiguous relationship to its racial discourses, Emma Francis has shown through analysis of Levy’s 1886 ‘Jewish Children’, that a discourse of Jewish degeneration also appears in Levy’s scholarly work. Francis argues that Levy’s views were not widely held within the broader Anglo-Jewish community (‘Amy Levy’ 184-5), yet it is worth mentioning that many other Jewish people of the nineteenth century used “scientific” discourses of race to represent Jewish experiences. As Gilman writes, ‘As Jews, they were the object of the scientific gaze; as scientists, they were themselves the observing, neutral, universal eye’ (*The Jew’s Body* 47). The agency and ambivalence Gilman alludes to here operates throughout Levy’s fictional and critical works as she takes the position of both the object and the (partial) eye. The position taken by Francis and others tends to ignore the fact that Levy is proud of, as well as concerned by, the characteristics she ascribes to Jewish children and culture:

It must not be forgotten that those very things which go to make up the peculiar and irresistible charm of young Israel constituted at the same time his danger. Such vivacity, such sense of fun, such sensibility and intelligence at so early an age, could only be the product of a very delicate and elaborate organism: a bit of mechanism that will not bear to be tampered with rashly. We scarcely needed Mr. Sully and his psychology to tell us that mental precocity is by no means necessarily the forerunner of mental mediocrity, but it may nearly always be accepted as the sign of a highly developed nervous organisation. (‘Jewish Children’ 530)

As Linda Beckman points out, ‘Levy seems to have been exploring the question of whether her tendencies toward depression and anxiety stemmed at least in part from her upbringing as a Jewish child and from being born with a temperament that she associated with her Jewishness’ (*Amy Levy* 127). Francis writes that ‘Levy refuses to

grant the English Jews a cultural modernity' (185), which implicitly situates Levy as an outside agent, separate from the Jewish people she writes of. Yet, in articles such as 'Jewish Children', Levy clearly identifies with the cultural phenomena she writes of, whether she thinks positively or negatively of it.

While it *remains* that Levy's representations of Jewish people both reinforce and deconstruct the "figure of the Jew", it is important to note the complexity, and ambiguity, of *Reuben Sachs*'s narrative voice. Linda Hunt (later Beckman) was one of the first scholars to draw attention to this complex ambiguity, writing in 1994 that:

Aware that a writer's ability, including her own, to imagine the world and produce meaning is limited and defined by the belief-system which she receives from the systems of representation that the society makes available, Levy writes her Jewish novel in such a way that "truth" is hard to pin down. *Reuben Sachs* is a text whose stance toward the sector of Jewish society it seeks to represent is far from resolved. Epistemologically experimental, it lacks what Penny Boumelha, in a theoretical discussion of classic realism, calls "a controlling 'truth voice'" (248)

The models of Jewishness available to Levy in the nineteenth century were even more inadequate when considered through the limitations of classical realism. In Penny Boumelha's discussion of realism and feminism cited by Hunt (later Beckman), Boumelha writes that:

chief among the tactics of the classic realist or readerly text is a form of closure – not simply formal, but ideological – by which the reader is continually produced and addressed as a unified individual human subject, through such means as the convergence at a single and uniform ideological position of a set of hierarchised discourses of which one is always a controlling 'truth-voice'. (320)

In a time when the models of Jewishness discursively available were inadequate to Levy's purposes (see 'The Jew in Fiction'), a classical realist mode, dependent as it is on mimesis, is also inadequate. My discussion of Levy's Thomson essay, Matthew Arnold's writings on poetry and Heine, and Levy's writing on Jewish Humour and

Jewish representation in fiction, provides support for Hunt's (later Beckman's) argument that the narrative voice in *Reuben Sachs* is deliberately ambiguous. The following analyses operate from this position that *Reuben Sachs* is not a realist novel.

Until recently, scholars have tended to overlook *Reuben Sachs*'s feminist themes in favour of analysing its Jewish ones (see Dwor; Bernstein 'Introduction' *Reuben*; Rochelson; Hunt; Valman 'Barbarous'). This, however, obscures the extent to which Levy's engagement with Anglo-Jewish culture is feminist: Judith's plot, which as a romance plot is inherently entwined with Reuben's, is a feminist critique of contemporary Anglo-Jewish culture. Meri-Jane Rochelson was perhaps the first scholar to focus upon gender in *Reuben Sachs*. She writes that although other New Woman novels of the 1880s and 1890s abound with suicides, deaths in childbirth, and disillusioned existences, they nevertheless featured heroines 'whose ideals ennobled her spiritual life, regardless of how depressingly little they were realised' (324). In Judith, however, 'Amy Levy imagines a potentially brilliant woman who has given up before the first page' (324). I concur with Rochelson and add that Judith is not a New Woman figure (Gertrude from *Romance* comes closer to inhabiting this position) and though I would not hesitate to call *Reuben Sachs* feminist, its publication date and models of gender fit uncomfortably within the New Woman frame.

Levy's scholarly work illuminates the representations of gender in *Reuben Sachs*. In 1886, the year Levy published a series of articles in *The Jewish Chronicle*, she published 'Middle-Class Jewish Women of To-Day', subtitled '(By a Jewess)' (525). Again, in citing passages and ideas from this article, it is important to note that unlike *Reuben Sachs* which had an anticipated wider readership, Levy's articles in *The Jewish Chronicle* are addressing a largely Jewish readership. Nevertheless, she asks 'What, in fact, is the ordinary life of a Jewish middle-class woman?'

Carefully excluded, with almost Eastern jealousy, from every-day intercourse with men and youths of her own age, she is plunged all at once—a half-fledged, often half-chaperoned creature—into the “vortex” of a middle-class ball-room, and is there expected to find her own level. In the very face of statistics, of the unanswerable logic of facts, she is taught to look upon marriage as the only satisfactory termination to her career. (525)

This sentiment is repeated almost exactly in *Reuben Sachs* when we are introduced to Judith and have learned that she was raised by her Uncle’s wealthier family. The narrator remarks of her upbringing that:

[T]he life, the position, the atmosphere, though she knew it not, were repressive ones. 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.

She had, it is true, the advantage of good looks; on the other hand she was, comparatively speaking, portionless; and the marriageable Jew, as Esther was fond of the saying, is even rarer and shyer than the marriageable Gentile. (68)

Here, as in ‘Middle-Class Jewish Women of To-Day’, the first layer of critique is a materialist one – women in Anglo-Jewish communities are pressured to marry, to marry wealth and not to pursue any other meaningful life goals. Levy, however, was aware that women outnumbered men in Britain at this point, and that some women, such as herself, were getting along just fine without marriage. Levy’s critique here, however, goes beyond the merely materialist. The narrator’s evaluation of Judith continues:

But 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 that of the narrowest; of the world, of London, of society beyond her own set, it may be said that she had seen nothing at first hand; had looked at it all, not with her own eyes, but with the eyes of Reuben Sachs. (69)

As Nadia Valman observes, Levy’s criticism of gender relations is applicable beyond Anglo-Jewish settings and indeed is not dissimilar in approach to Mona Caird’s

canonical article 'Marriage' ('Amy Levy' 92), published in the *Westminster Review* in August 1888. Levy would have been working on *Reuben Sachs* following the publication of 'Marriage', and it could very well have influenced her thinking (see Letter 32 267-8; Beckman, *Amy Levy* 270 for dates). Caird, like Levy, writes of 'the unfortunate girls whose horizon is as limited as their opportunities, whose views of life are cribbed, cabined, and confined by their surroundings, whose very right and wrong, just and unjust, are chosen for them' ('Ideal Marriage' 621). She also notes that 'It is impossible for an outsider to realise the restrictions and narrowness of the average girl's life' and claimed that the result of this was a 'bewildered being, stunted in intelligence, in self-respect' (qtd in Valman 'Amy Levy' 92). To return to Rochelson's commentary, it is not, like in many New Woman novels, that Judith is independent or ambitious, and is restricted in mobility by patriarchal society, but rather that her conditioned subjectivity has prevented her from desiring or realising opportunity in the first instance.

Judith's naivety is contrasted with Esther Kohnthal, who is arguably the "feminist character" of the novel. Esther is the only child of "poor Kohnthal", who is in a mad house, and 'according to her own account, [she is] the biggest heiress and ugliest woman in all Bayswater' (62). Esther is variously drawn as embittered and deeply passionate. That is to say, though she is the most enlightened and confident female character, it has not necessarily brought any happiness into her life. Like Leo, and unlike the others, she is an avid reader of poetry which, as shall be discussed, the novel associates with passion and therefore liberation (134). Esther is also the most critical of their Judaism. For the Day of Atonement, although all of the "children" regard the services with mild respect – the Leunigers, for example, had breakfasted beforehand and Leo leaves early (89; 91) – Esther absconds completely and instead stays in bed



reading *Good-bye, Sweetheart!*, a sensationalist Rhoda Broughton novel from 1872 (91). Esther's feminist consciousness is never accounted for in the novel, though her position of independent wealth, the absence of her father, her atheism or agnosticism, and her "ugliness" are notable and unique features of her characterisation. In a later scene in the novel, once Judith's heart has been broken after Reuben's political ascension, Esther says to Judith: 'When I was a little girl, ... a little girl of eight years old, I wrote in my prayer book: 'Cursed art Thou, O Lord my God, Who hast the cruelty to make me a woman.' And I have gone on saying prayer all my life—the only one' (129). Esther's admission speaks back to an earlier instance in the novel, in which we learn that 'no prayer goes up from synagogue with greater fervour' than the Morning Benediction, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord my God, who hast not made me a woman" (74). Esther's sharp rejection of religion and social convention is contrasted with Judith's unthinking submission to them. At the Day of Atonement:

Judith Quixano went through her devotions upheld by that sense of fitness, of obedience to law and order, which characterized her every action.

But it cannot be said that her religion had any strong hold over her; she accepted it unthinkingly.

These prayers, read so diligently, in a language of which her knowledge was exceedingly imperfect, these reiterated phrases of an austere tribal deity, these expressions of a hope whose consummation was neither desired nor expected, what connection could they have with the personal needs, the human longings of this touchingly ignorant and limited creature? (91)

Nadia Valman reads this passage and gendered critique of religious observance as adopting popular nineteenth-century Christian polemics against Judaism, often found in fictional Evangelical conversion narratives ('Amy Levy' 90-91). She writes that *Reuben Sachs* 'updates in feminist terms the paradigm popularized by earlier nineteenth-century Evangelical novels, in which the Jewish woman was consistently presented as particularly oppressed and particularly in need of salvation' ('Amy Levy' 94). Valman

reads this as a reproduction of the common Christian critique of Judaism, that as a religion it is ‘law-bound and lacking in spiritual substance’ (94). The literary history of “the Jewess” into which Valman reads Judith and *Reuben Sachs* is illuminating, yet I think her reading does not give credit to the multiplicity of perspectives represented in *Reuben Sachs* when she argues for the affinities between *Reuben Sachs* and other conversion narratives. Especially when read in context with Levy’s *Jewish Chronicle* articles, I contend that *Reuben Sachs*’ engagement with Judaism is more ambivalent than Valman positions it to be. For example, she writes that Reuben ‘weakly’ defends ‘Judaism against his assimilated cousin Leo Leuniger, who prophesies its super-session as a Darwinian process of adaptation and extinction’ (‘Amy Levy’ 103). This scene is, in fact, one of the most uncomfortable for a reader precisely because the narrator refuses to wholly endorse either Leo or Reuben’s perspectives. When Leo says that ‘we are materialists to our fingers’ ends’, Reuben responds that ‘Idealists don’t grow on every bush’ and that ‘This is a materialistic age, a materialistic country’ (100). When Leo calls Judaism ‘the religion of materialism’ (100), Reuben answers that:

‘It is no good to pretend,’ answered Reuben in his reasonable, pacific way, ‘that our religion remains a vital force among the cultivated and thoughtful Jews of to-day. Of course it has been modified, as we ourselves have been modified, by the influence of western thought and western morality. And belief, among thinking people of all races, has become, as you know perfectly, a matter of personal idiosyncrasy.’ (101)

The debate continues and Leo refers to ‘such eagerness to take advantage; such sickening, hideous greed; such cruel, remorseless striving for power and importance; such ever-active, ever-hungry vanity’ (101). And Reuben speaks to the “virtues” of Judaism and Jewish communities: ‘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?’ (101). As they continue, Leo

invokes the Darwinian argument that Valman alludes to, and Reuben speaks passionately of the ‘strange, strong instinct which has held us so long together’, saying that ‘it is not a thing easily eradicated’:

It will come into play when it is least expected. Jew will gravitate to Jew, though each may call himself by another name. If prejudice died, if difference of opinion died, if all the world, metaphorically speaking, thought one thought and spoke one language, there would still remain those unspeakable mysteries, affinity and—love. (102)

And here the debate ends, whereby the narrator shifts attention to how Reuben’s defence of Judaism has roused passion between Judith and Reuben. The text itself, at this stage, refuses to endorse either Reuben or Leo at the cost of the other. Like its narrative voice more generally, it is resisting any universal judgement. The novel’s ambivalence here suggests that Levy’s feelings towards Jewishness had developed since the Leopold/Reuben contrast in ‘Leopold Leuniger: A Study’ wherein the Reuben character is defenceless. *Reuben Sachs* will, however, punish Reuben for his materialism and the denial of his “race-love” (the novel describes the Judith-Reuben romance in these terms). Yet we also know that ‘The time was yet to come when [Leo] should acknowledge to himself the depth of his tribal feeling, of love for his race, which lay at the root of his nature’ even if ‘At present he was aware of nothing but revolt against, almost hatred of, a people who, as far as he could see, lived without ideals, and was given up body and soul to the pursuit of material advantage’ (90).

The ambivalence of the novel is repeated in Levy’s scholarly work, where in ‘Middle-Class Jewish Women of To-Day’ she writes that sexism flourishes within Jewish culture ‘with more vigour, more pertinacity, over a more wide-spread area, with a deeper root than in any other English Society’ (526). Yet can she can also passionately advocate for the continuation of Jewish culture and belonging in ‘Jewish

Humour', in a manner closer to Reuben's feelings than Leo's. Levy was certainly critical of aspects of Anglo-Jewish culture, but it is hyperbolic to call these critical engagements indications of Jewish self-hatred, as for example Linda Zatlín does (513). However, it is also important not to dismiss other, positive or even ambivalent, identifications with Judaism that are present in Levy's oeuvre.

What *Reuben Sachs* does more definitely endorse, and what feminist Esther and disillusioned idealised Leo hold, is a love of passionate poetics. Emotion, whether realised through romantic or textual encounters, is represented as a liberating force. It liberates Leo from materialism, Esther from conservatism, and Judith from her ignorance, which had been so-encompassing as to act as a 'narcotic' (Hunt 242). It is remarked of Judith early in the novel and through Reuben's perspective that she has not 'one grain of sentiment in [her] whole composition' (79). It is not until the novel's climax at the dance, and Judith's following "poetry epiphany", that Judith experiences deep emotion and self-reflexivity.

The November dance is hosted by the Leunigers and is eagerly anticipated by Judith as an opportunity to see Reuben (122-3). Judith, as she is commonly depicted, is wearing white for the occasion and the narrator comments that:

Moreover to-night some indefinable change had come over the character of her beauty, heightening it, intensifying it, giving it new life and colour. The calm, unawakened look which many people had found so baffling, had left her face; the eyes, always curiously mournful, shone out with a new soft fire. (113)

Already, prior the dance, the passion Judith feels towards Reuben "awakens" her face and enlivens her spirit. Her subconscious dreams are nearly dashed, with Reuben failing to arrive at the dance until the striking of midnight. By the time Reuben encounters Judith, her dance card is full, to which he responds by gently taking it from her hand and tearing it to pieces (120). She takes Reuben's arm as he leads her to the

‘furthest corner of the crimson recess’ (120). What follows is a symbolic consummation of their love:

There were some chrysanthemums like snowflakes in her bodice, scarcely showing against the white, and as she turned, Reuben bent towards her and laid his hand on them.

‘I am going to commit a theft,’ he said, and his low voice shook a little.

Judith yielded, passive, rapt, as his fingers fumbled with the gold pin. It was like a dream to her, a wonderful dream, with which the whirling maze of dancers, the heavy scents, the delicious music were inextricably mingled. And mingling with it also was a strange, harsh sound in the street outside, which, faint and muffled at first, was growing every moment louder and more distinct. (121)

The symbol of Judith’s sexuality, the chrysanthemum flowers affixed to her breast, is “stolen” by Reuben as Judith yields to him. The following sentence is an assemblage of images, evoking multiple senses simultaneously (Bernstein, ‘Introduction’ *Reuben* 40-41).

It is not just the natural world, however, but the street and its (rising) sounds that complete Judith’s sexual awakening. Reuben, once he has succeeded in loosening Judith’s flowers, holds them ‘loosely, with doubtful fingers, suddenly realizing what he had done’ (121). With Judith now shivering, the sounds from the street grow even louder and more ominous:

‘What is it they are saying?’ he cried, dropping the flowers, springing to the aperture, and pulling back the curtain.

Outside the house stood a dark figure, a narrow crackling sheet flung across the shoulder. A voice mounted up, clear in discordance through the mist: ‘Death of a conservative M.P.! Death of the member for St. Baldwin’s!’ (121-122)

The headline of the evening Special Edition<sup>13</sup> is being called by a newspaper boy, forecasting Reuben's inevitable political career as the new Conservative member for St. Baldwin's and therefore the improbability of Judith and Reuben marrying. Judith hears the cries and, knowing its meaning, stands cold and trembling, while Reuben's face had 'the look of a man who has escaped a great danger' (122). Reuben excuses himself, expecting to find a telegram at home, while for Judith 'At her feet lay her own chrysanthemums, crushed by Reuben's departing feet' (122).

With the novel's romance plot failed, the narrative turns almost exclusively to Judith. Desolate at Reuben's implicit rejection, she realises what it expected of her: to marry Bertie Lee-Harrison, whose interests in her had been obvious to everyone at the dance. Yet her new-found passion and broadening of consciousness – 'It was impossible any longer to deceive herself' (124) – make the prospect of a loveless marriage almost unbearable:

The conventions, the disguises, which she had been taught to regard as the only realities, fell down suddenly before the living reality of this thing which had grown up between her and Reuben. She recognized in it a living creature, wonderful, mysterious, beautiful and strong, with all the rights of its existence. It was impossible that they who had given it breath should do violence to it, should stain their hands with its blood—it was impossible. (125)

As Judith gazes into a mirror, a symbol of self-reflection, the narrator and Judith's consciousness merge: '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'. (125)

Lamenting the passivity that forecloses Judith's capacity for self-realisation, the

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<sup>13</sup> Levy has a poem, "Ballade of a Special Edition" announcing murders in Mile End, a reference to the Ripper murders. The evening Special Edition also ominously features in *The Romance of a Shop* to announce another death. Gertrude refers to the paper-seller as a 'fiend ... vociferating upwards' (162).

narrator states ‘There is nothing more terrible, more tragic, than this ignorance of a woman of her own nature, her own possibilities, her own passions’ (125). Later, when Judith’s grief makes sleep impossible, she dismisses the contents of her own bookshelf (filled with historical novels, political essays and biographies – all gifts from Reuben), and instead goes to Leo’s unused bedroom to find literary escape. Here she finds poetry: volumes of Heine, Richard Wagner’s *Parsifal*, a treatise on Greek theatre, and ‘two books of poetry, each of which, had she but known it, appealed strongly to two strongly marked phases of Leo’s mood—*Poems and Ballads*, and a worn green copy of the poems of Clough’ (131-132). Judith selects Swinburne, a writer Levy also references in her poetry, and is particularly moved by ‘Triumph of Time’ (132). As tears fall down her cheeks, the narrator, blending again here with Judith, notes that:

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. (133)

As she shuts the book and sits up in bed, Judith/the narrator (it is by now unclear) ponders over having many times seen ‘Esther dissolved in tears over her favourite poets’ and wonders whether she should ‘grow in time to be like Esther, undignified, unreserved? Would people talk about her, pity her, say that she had had unfortunate affairs?’ (134). Judith’s encounter with Swinburne’s poetry affirms her own emotional experience. However, through reference to Esther’s reputation as pitiful and undignified, Judith quickly doubts her ability to accept such intense and complex states of feeling. Esther’s rare independent wealth allows her to transgress some boundaries of gender, such as the expectation of marriage, in a way financially dependent Judith cannot.

The epiphany of Judith, where deep emotion creates a hitherto unknown understanding of the world, is a variation on what Beckman calls Levy's "Hunger Poet". Beckman writes of an 'artistic soul that hungers for passion and personal fulfilment and anguishes over their absence' (60). She also notes that in Levy's later poetry and fiction, this emotional yearning takes on philosophical implications (60). Judith's emotional awakening coincides with her mental, more philosophical awakening, as she realises fully both the love she feels for Reuben and the unjustness of the society that has denied her the self-knowledge of this feeling. Judith had earlier decried Esther and Leo for these same feelings. Speaking of Judith's feelings towards the Leunigers, the narrator notes: 'If, at times, she was discontented, she was only vaguely aware of her own discontent. To rail at fate, to cry out against the gods, were amusements she left to such people as Esther and Leo, for whom, in her quiet way, she had considerable contempt' (68). As suggested, these yearnings are evident in both of the Leopold Leuniger characters: Leopold in 'Leopold Leuniger: A Study' and Leo in *Reuben Sachs*. The former is described as having been an 'eager lad, with fits of high spirits and sudden moods of melancholy'. When he began his studies at Cambridge, he was troubling his 'head with the problem that nobody resolves, and that everybody at some time or another attempts to solve – the problem of existence; of the universe'. Both Leopolds share what appears to be an intense love of music, specifically the violin, and poetry. Judith, on the other hand, is forbidden from demonstrating emotional complexity until late in the novel and has no similar resources for expressing such depth of feeling. In *Reuben Sachs* Leo is observed:

The long, delicate hands of the violinist, the dusky, sensitive face, as he bent lovingly over the instrument, seemed to vibrate with the strings over which he had such mastery.



The voice of a troubled soul cried out to-night in Leo's music, whose accents even the hard brilliance of his accompanist failed to drown. (66)

And Leopold is similarly as 'the eager face which grew so wonderfully soft under the influence of the beautiful sounds which he could so unerringly call forth'. Judith, however, is given no such outlet. Even Euphemia, of Levy's 1880 short story, 'Euphemia: A Sketch', is allowed to write and produce a successful play before marriage and therefore retirement. While the decision to marry off the otherwise ambitious and perceptive Euphemia may seem out of step with Levy's own life and feminist ambitions, Euphemia is still able to fulfil some of the desire later denied to the two Leopolds and to Judith. When Dr. H expresses surprise at Euphemia's decision to marry, she exclaims:

[W]ith all your wisdom I see you don't understand us women. What is fame to us? Does it satisfy the hunger at our hearts for love, the wild craving in our souls for protection and guidance, for something in our turn to protect and guide? Fame and a brilliant career don't fill up our lives – we want, some-thing else.

This Romantic perspective on life, where emotional intensity is equated with transcendence, is featured throughout Levy's poetry and life. Vernon Lee remembered Levy expressing this desire for intensity, and recounted Levy's words some years later: 'You see, there is a fundamental difference between us. You re satisfied with what call *happiness*; but I want *rapture* and *excess*' (Qtd. in Beckman, *Amy Levy* 61).

Towards the end of *Reuben Sachs*, we are shown Judith sitting alone in her bedroom. The narrator says:

The windows of a flat in the Albert Hall Mansions opposite were open, and a lady who was standing by one of them could smell the characteristic London odour, and could hear the sound of the children's voices, the rolling and turning of the wheels, and the shuffle and tramp of footsteps on the pavement below. She stood there a moment, one bare, beautiful hand and arm resting on the back of the adjacent couch, her eyes mechanically fixed on the glistening gilt cross

surmounting the Albert Memorial, then she turned away suddenly, the thick, rich folds of her white silk dress trailing heavily behind her. The room across which she moved was small, but bright, and fitted up with the varied and elaborate luxury of a modern fashionable drawing room. Among the articles of *bric-a-brac*, costly, interesting, or merely bizarre which adorned it, were an antique silver *Hanacuh* lamp and a spice box, such as the Jews make use of in certain religious services, of the same material. (152)

Judith and her bedroom, where she stands alone and without obvious purpose, are framed by the gilt cross opposite her, while significance is given to the Jewish products inside the room. The juxtaposition of Christian and Jewish imagery suggests that the novel's end maintains the uneasiness introduced at its epigraph. With three months having passed since her marriage to Bertie, we are told that 'Judith had learnt many things, had grown strangely wise. . . . Yes, she knew now more clearly what before she had only dimly and instinctively felt: the nature and extent of the wrong which had been perpetrated; which had been dealt her; which she in turn had dealt herself and another person' (153). And though Judith's romantic desires are never to be fulfilled, the announcement of a pregnancy in the closing paragraph suggests potential for continuation and love.

After the largely negative reception of *Reuben Sachs* by the Jewish press, it is unsurprising that Levy chose an explicitly Gentile narrator for her short story 'Cohen of Trinity'. The story is of a brilliant, odd Jewish Oxford student who leaves the university early and goes on to publish a wildly successful literary work before committing suicide. The story is structured with foreknowledge of Cohen's death, and Levy here is asking the reader to witness the process of the narrator's naïve mis-reading of Cohen. The close of the story features the narrator's memory of her last encounter with Cohen, during which he describes his life's outlook since his literary success:

'Nothing,' he said presently, 'can alter the relations of things—their permanent, essential relations. . . . "They *shall* know, they *shall* understand, they *shall* feel

what I am.” That’s what I used to say to myself in the old days. I suppose now “they” do know, more or less, and what of that?’

‘I should say the difference from your point of view was a very great one. But you always chose to cry for the moon.’

‘Well,’ he said, quietly looking up, ‘it’s the only thing worth having.’

I was struck afresh by the man’s insatiable demands, which looked at times like a passionate striving after perfection, yet went side by side with the crudest vanity, the most vulgar desire for recognition.

I rose soon after his last remark, which was delivered with a simplicity and an air of conviction which made one cease to suspect the mountebank; we shook hands and bade each other good-night. (485)

Levy is exploring here is the impossibility of recognition of a Jewish artist (person) by a non-Jewish narrator (society). The recognition that Cohen craves is recognition of individuated humanity and subject-hood, and not recognition of literary stature. With this narratorial strategy, which I contend is also employed in *Reuben Sachs* albeit less simply and explicitly, Levy shows how Jewish identity is unintelligible to late Victorian-London (Christian) culture and is continually the subject of misrecognition and mis-interpretation (Scheinberg, ‘Canonizing’ 181). By fracturing narrative perspective and using free indirect discourse, framing the narrative in Christian textuality, and engaging in intertextual dialogue with a history of Jewish representation, *Reuben Sachs* reveals the contingency and partiality of Jewish identity, and the problem therefore of searching for an “authentic” Jewishness, which, by extension, problematises and implicates the construction of and search for “authentic” British identity.

## In a Minor Key: Conclusion

Amy Levy was a keen and critical observer of late-nineteenth century London. She demonstrated this from a remarkably early age and throughout the 1870s and 1880s she published literary criticism, journalism, short stories, poetry and narrative prose. Her position as an educated, Anglo-Jewish, non-heterosexual woman living in Bloomsbury appears to have informed much of her work. From her review of *Aurora Leigh* in 1875 and onwards, Levy demonstrated interest in relations of power, institutions, identities and subjectivities.

Amy Levy was fortunate to come from a financially privileged and intellectually progressive family. Her parents' attitudes towards their daughters' education ensured that Levy received a higher education at Brighton Day School for Girls, the seventh school founded under the Girls' Public Day School Company (1872-1905). At Brighton Levy received what few young women of her generation did: a classical education. This allowed Levy to enter Newnham College, Cambridge, to further her studies. Levy's privilege and simultaneous marginality gave her the skills to access and engage with dominant institutions and discourses, and the insights to interrogate their limits.

Levy's feminist credentials are unquestionable, and through her journalism, prose and poetry, she mounted varied and cogent critiques of contemporary institutions and ideologies. Though her critiques of gender were her most successful, Levy's engagement with discourses of sexuality, ethnicity, and religion reveal some of her most complex thinking. Levy's works on gender emerged from and built upon feminist writings and frameworks. Women's roles and opportunities were expanding and the New Woman of the 1890s was soon to emerge. That Levy wrote about gender discrimination is therefore not surprising. Levy's contribution to late-nineteenth-century

feminist writing lies, however, in how she used the city and its aesthetics to represent and expand a woman's perspective of modernity. That she did so in the 1880s, prior to the widespread interest in French symbolism, for example, gives her insight originality and complexity.

The modernist leanings which inform the feminist aspects of Levy's work were also integral to her ability to envision non-heterosexual realities. Unable to fully articulate a specifically same-sex desire, Levy uses liminality in her poetry to allow a transient queer presence. Distinct from the Foucauldian "reverse discourse" presented by Oscar Wilde in 1890s, Levy's same-sex representations circumvent discourse and exist as something much closer to a queer aesthetic. In eluding discourse, though, and in depending upon a liminal transience, Levy's same-sex poems show only fleeting fulfilment, and often end, as many early queer narratives do, with sadness.

Finally, Levy's engagement with Jewish culture, history, and heritage constitutes her most complex, and most fraught, work. The ambiguity of *Reuben Sachs* continues to haunt her legacy, revealing how minority writers are often given a heavier burden than writers from the majority culture. Looking at Levy's *oeuvre* intertextually, as this thesis has done, enables productive analyses of *Reuben Sachs*, shedding light on its ambiguous literary techniques, especially as seen in its narration. One of the last stories to be published during Levy's lifetime, 'Cohen at Trinity', is the most illuminating. It encapsulates how Levy sought to represent that which society could not recognise.

This thesis has focussed upon Amy Levy's engagement with subjectivity and identity, and the strategies she employed to account for the "minor" of the late-nineteenth-century. I have argued that Levy self-consciously subverts and transgresses contemporary genres and forms to represent experiences not accounted for in available

literary modes. She combines realism and romance in *The Romance of a Shop* to give her female protagonists the choice of both love and work. The shifting perspective of her narrator in *Reuben Sachs* allows Levy to examine Anglo-Jewish culture from both insider and outsider points of view, destabilising contemporary rationalising discourses of race and ethnicity. Levy's late poetry best shows the desire to evade objectifying discourses altogether, and to write the passionately subjective truths of her life.

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