

**Nadia Valman**, *The Jewess in Nineteenth-century British Literary Culture*,  
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In the English speaking world the last two decades have seen the birth of important new research works extremely sensitive to the seductions of cultural history; such works have considered the representation of the Jew between the 19th and early 20th century in the scientific milieu, in the periodical press, in the political discourse as well as in the literary field. In this last sector, the work of Bryan Cheyette (*Constructions of 'the Jew' in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations 1875-1945*, Cambridge U. Press, 1993) has had a decisive impact on historiography and the book of Nadia Valman has been directly inspired by that approach.

In part due to the difficulty encountered in coming to a clear definition of "Jewishness", the character of the Jew has been used in diverse historical contexts to evocate every possible declination of "otherness", be it religious, sexual, racial, cultural or ethical. Once discriminatory legislations fell and emancipation came to be, recognizing the Jew in every day life became increasingly more and more difficult. Analyzing how the dominant part of society has imagined and represented Jews contributes to illuminate some aspects of the cultural exchange between minority and majority and offers a precious point of view on the modes of self-representation of the majority culture. While this is true for nearly any epoch, the 19<sup>th</sup> century seems a particularly interesting context in which to consider such issues, as it was the age in which national and patriotic narratives developed and were progressively led to radical extremes through a constant negative definition of collective identity based on the counter-image of the enemy or the foreigner. Studies concerned with these themes have a relevance that goes well beyond the limited field of Jewish history.

Nadia Valman's book, published in the series entitled *Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth century Literature and Culture*, fits brilliantly into this research pattern. Concentrating her attention on the literary representation of Jewish women, the Author introduces gender as a problematic element, a crucial factor in the structure of national and patriotic discourse. The Author moves from the observation that most of the existing studies have concentrated on the construction of the image of the male Jew and thus asks herself whether the literary figure of the Jewish female is only a passive appendix of male characters or if it has had, on the contrary, its own specific function and relevance. This is what Valman calls «the Jewess question» (pp. 1-14), reaching the conclusion that «throughout the nineteenth century, [...] the figure of the Jewess marked out the axes of difference through which English Protestant

identity was imagined» (p. 2). According to her analysis, the figure of the Jewish women proves extremely ductile, capable of incarnating the fears and the hopes of Victorian society even better than the masculine figure. Women appear to be more elusive and malleable figures, more vulnerable yet more dangerous. Their bodies do not carry visible marks, while circumcision modifies the male's body, making the Jewish man virtually impossible to be completely assimilated. The Jewess seems to incarnate cultural permeability and the mobility of the borderline separating majority and minority cultures. It thus sheds light not only the dangers that the era of emancipation posed to the minority's survival, but also - and more significantly - on some of the internal weaknesses of the categories structuring majority culture. Valman's sources - rigorously British - are exclusively drawn from the literary field and range from well known works such as Scott's *Ivanhoe* or Joyce's *Ulysses* to far less famous texts, books that have slipped into oblivion but that at the time of their publication had a meaningful success. The diverse communities to which the authors of the works analyzed belonged serve the need of raising key questions and allow a proper context centered analysis; such questions are methodologically relevant as much as gender or the diachronical approach chosen by Valman. She distinguishes the narrative works produced by authors belonging to the liberal area, to the evangelical community or the Jewish community.

The book is divided into an introduction (*Introduction: the Jewess question*, pp. 1-14), five central chapters and a conclusion. The various chapters are built on a thematic axis, which is also a good diachronical guide, since literary representations are in some way a reflection of the social, cultural and political events which shape the life of a society. The second chapter (*Repellent beauty: the liberal nation and the Jewess*, pp. 15-50) stresses the importance of granting civil rights to Jews in the evolution of a liberal conception of the State and - to a certain degree - of the nation, while shedding light on the ambivalences present also within the minds of supporters of emancipation. The Jewish case appears to be a testing ground and, at the same time, the utmost limit of the strategies of tolerance and inclusion. Jewish women - often described according to an orientalist canon - are represented a perilous temptation for the ethnic and moral integrity of British men. At the same time, Jewish women could be raised to be models of feminine virtue when, as *Ivanhoe's* Rebecca, they sacrifice themselves allowing for the accomplishment of more righteous unions.

The following chapter is instead centered on protestant narratives on the history of Jewish women (*Jewish persuasions: gender and the culture of conversion*, pp. 51-84). In these texts, the representation of a Jewess' conversion comes to symbolize the triumph and superiority of

Christian values, and the self-identification of the Christian female reader who would be encouraged to reflect on the responsibilities of her religious and gender identity. These stories reproduce common stereotypes on feminine nature, women are depicted as more emotionally sensitive than men and are imagined both as capable of profound depravation and as proprietors of great virtues.

The fourth chapter (*Women of Israel: femininity, politics and Anglo-Jewish fiction*, pp. 85-129) represents a convincing portrait of how «the status of women in Judaism and the figure of the Jewess [...] became a key rhetorical element in the controversy over Jewish conversion and Jewish civil rights» (p. 86), and thus illustrate how novels and short stories acquired also a political dimension within the Jewish community's life.

In *Hellenist heroines: commerce, culture and the Jewess* (fifth chapter, pp. 130-172) the author concentrates on texts (sometimes very famous ones such as Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*) in which some of the most common stereotypes concerning Jewish greed and Jewish economic power emerge. Female characters seem to be capable of interpreting a sometimes cathartic and purifying role, often at the price of great suffering and self-sacrifice, in opposition to the negative imagery with which Jewish men are depicted. Towards the end of the 1870s a language that insists on racial characterizations starts to emerge. This topic is dealt with in the conclusive chapter which confronts the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup>, when a racialized language and the theme of degeneration formed a linguistic code that appeared to be widely present also in Jewish circles (*The shadow of the harem: fin-de-siècle racial romance*, pp. 173-205). In particular, Valman presents the reader with the writings of Amy Levy and Julia Frankau, who were received very unfriendly in the British-Jewish periodical press. Their representation of a materialistic and suffocating Jewish world closed in itself was accused to support anti-Semites and their rhetoric. In their novels, Jewish women appear to be strikingly more sensible and more modern, less tied to the backward-looking and "oriental" markers of the race as compared to the males. Thus they were to be more smoothly integrated into the surrounding society. Once again stereotypes on feminine nature are dynamically intertwined with the imaginary attributes of the Jews. The female figure appears as an element of dialogue and mobility, at the same time weak and occupying a crucial position for the survival of religion, culture and community.

In Valman's research the adoption of a gender perspective is not an arbitrary choice, but reflects successfully the spirit and content of the sources she used, shedding light on nuances that would otherwise be lost to historical reconstruction. It thus seems to me a successful

analytical and methodological experiment which deserves to be developed further and repeated for other national contexts.

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