Cynthia Scheinberg[1]

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Singing in Foreign Land: Anglo-Jewish Poetry, 1812–47

(University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019)

by Karen A. Weisman

KAREN WEISMAN'S *Singing in Foreign Land: Anglo-Jewish Poetry, 1812-47* has many strengths and will appeal to many kinds of readers, including those with interests in Coleridge and other Romantic poets' intertextual connections with Jewish writers; those seeking a more diverse view of British Romanticism; those seeking deep and intricate analyses of the major Anglo-Jewish writers of the period; and those with particular interests in Jewish-Christian literary relations. While offering an important intervention in Romantic history and poetics, the volume also demonstrates an intertextual method for reading Anglo-Jewish poets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that makes frequent connection to the major (Christian) poets of the day. Weisman's close readings, which offer fascinating links between Jewish and Christian writers in this period, moves the study of Anglo-Jewish literature forward. Moreover, her focus on the deep intertextual connections between Jewish and Christian literary traditions also raises some important methodological questions for those of us continuing in this field of Anglo-Jewish literature to consider.

Weisman is brilliantly attentive to the many subtle nuances of English literary history that Anglo-Jewish writers negotiated. As the Introduction lays out, Weisman focuses on this key issue: if the conventions of the "bucolic" or pastoral are central features of Romantic poetry, how do Anglo-Jewish writers participate in that tradition when they have been generally excluded from the "bucolic" in England? Indeed, as Weisman highlights, Jewish communal and religious needs to live in diasporic urban spaces, as well as because of the various British limits on their citizenship rights through the end of the nineteenth century make these questions particularly important; Weisman beautifully complicates the issue even further:

> With no secure history binding them [Jews] to the landscape of British hearth and home, their history becomes a meditation on their historicity, on their urgency to constitute in writing a stable narrative of identity within England and within the King's English even as they gesture toward the impossibility—and sometimes even the undesirability—of doing so. (4)

Weisman's double-edged analyses of how Anglo-Jewish poets both seek and

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[1] Cynthia Scheinberg is Professor of English Literature at Roger Williams University. Her published works include *Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) and numerous articles and essays on Anglo-Jewish literature, among other topics. She is the recipient of numerous awards, grants, and honors from internationally recognized institutions such as the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies.

resist the construction of a stable literary identity within English literary traditions—despite their clear otherness from the assumed poetic identity of the white, Christian man—makes the volume provocative and engaging.

Any volume focusing on Anglo-Jewish writers necessarily needs to provide the historical background to Jewish history in England, as well as the key events and discourses around Anglo-Jewry in the period under discussion. Weisman organizes the book judiciously, not attempting to include all the required background history in the introduction, but rather incorporating information on a variety of relevant issues within individual chapters. Noting that the period under investigation, 1812–47, is "marked by a steady progression toward Jewish emancipation from Civil and political disabilities" (7), Weisman also notes that the poetry she examines does not primarily "agitat[e] on behalf of Jewish relief" but rather engages with issues of Anglo-Jewish political and civil disability that are "related to but not defined exclusively by statutory discrimination" (7). Nevertheless, the emphasis on how these writers' explorations of their Jewishness necessarily contradict conventional assumptions of English literary culture certainly does address issues of cultural outsider-ness, if not legal rights.

All the poets Weisman considers in the volume are important figures in the period. Emma Lyon, Hyman Hurwitz, Celia and Marion Moss (sisters) and Grace Aguilar are each given a chapter; Amy Levy, the late nineteenth-century writer, while not from the Romantic period, but rather the 1880s, is included in the "Coda" chapter in part because she offers a counterpoint to the volume's emphasis on engagement with the bucolic through her own poetic rejection of that tradition. Along with the Anglo-Jewish poetry that is of central concern to the volume, Weisman also draws extensive connections to Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Byron, and Wordsworth, while mentioning the influence of Felicia Hemans and Charlotte Smith. There is some attention paid to issues of gender and Anglo-Jewish poetics, particularly given that all but one of the Anglo-Jewish poets are women, a particularly important feature of Anglo-Jewish literary history. The volume will be of special use for graduate students and other advanced scholars; undergraduates might be challenged by the complexity of the prose and argument.

Weisman makes some essential connections between Jewish liturgical practice and specific Hebrew references in the Anglo-Jewish poetry, clearly demonstrating how these poets draw on that liturgical knowledge in their work. Weisman's own deep grasp of the uses of Hebrew scripture in Jewish liturgy makes many of her readings noteworthy, as with her insights regarding Emma Lyon's connection to the Psalm translation and tradition; here, I think Weisman demonstrates intersections between religion and literature particularly well, explicitly naming the powerful Christian assumptions that undergird so much of the period's constructions of poetry, while illuminating Lyon's mastery of Psalm translation, a field which had a strong resurgence in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England in Christian circles.

Likewise, the chapter on Hyman Hurwitz is a very welcome addition to the

volume, both because Hurwitz deserves more attention for both his poetry and his role as the first professor of Hebrew at University College, London, and as such, one of the first Jews to claim an authoritative position in England as a teacher and scholar of Hebrew—despite English Christian scholars' reliance on Jewish teachers long before this moment. Hurwitz also had a complicated relationship with Coleridge: he was Coleridge's Hebrew teacher, Coleridge endorsed him for the University College position, and Coleridge was the English translator of Hurwitz's Hebrew elegies—a relationship that Weisman explores in fascinating depth. While Coleridge obviously played an important role in the understanding of Hurwitz's own poetic identity, Weisman's lengthy charting of the intricate intertextual relationships between the two sometimes threatens to overshadow Hurwitz's own poetics—though Weisman's tracing of those links will likely be of great interest to Coleridge scholars. I was surprised, given the depth of the literary relations Weisman notes between Coleridge and Hurwitz, that Weisman did not include Coleridge's Christian proselytizing directed to Hurwitz, as his comment from "Notes on the Book of Common Prayer" in relation to Psalm 126 suggests: "O honoured Mr. Hurwitz could I but make you feel what *Grandeur*, what magnificence, what an everlasting significance & import Christianity gives to every part of your national History, to every page of your sacred Records!"[2]

As one completes the volume, there is a tangible sense of the extended literary conversation that Weisman—with her obvious expertise in both Anglo-Jewish and Romantic texts—is uniquely able to create between the Anglo-Jewish authors, who have rarely been understood as significant players in the British literary canon, and those poets who have made up that canon for decades, if not centuries. Weisman's readings of Anglo-Jewish works in relation to these more famous English Christian poets are truly insightful: in the Aguilar chapter, Weisman draws on many links to Shelley, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, and also connects the Moss sisters to Byron, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Tennyson, noting that "[t]o make a literary narrative out of English Jewish history is to make a coherent tale of belonging that is simultaneously about a history of rejection" (140).

This recognition of the "rejection" Anglo-Jews (and by extension Anglo-Jewish writers) faced in larger nineteenth century English Christian culture, as well as in later literary estimations of the period, makes the intertextual details Weisman finds between their work and their more famous counterparts all the more poignant, even as it raises some methodological conundrums for me as a reader. As much as I found myself admiring Weisman's readings, I also found myself pondering a question that I would necessarily pose to my own work as well. For while we can surely claim a certain success for the scholarship of the past twenty years or so that has focused on resurrecting Anglo-Jewish writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for English literary studies, much of

[2] *CM* I, 710; cf. Cynthia Scheinberg, "Reading Psalms in Nineteenth-Century England: The Contact Zone of Jewish-Christian Scriptural Relations," in *Constructing Nineteenth Century Religion: Literary, Historical, and Religious Studies in Dialogue*, ed. Joshua King and Winter Jade Werner, 225–45 (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2019).

this research calls on a method that positions Anglo-Jewish writers in relationship to the canonized English literary culture of which most of them were highly conversant. On the one hand, that method is crucial, since these Anglo-Jewish poets were (as Weisman so ably demonstrates) deeply engaged with mainstream Christian literary cultures of their day. But it seems to me that this scholarly method may in fact have served to tie these Anglo-Jewish poets' literary significance specifically to their canonized counterparts, and in that sense I wonder if this method actually ends up reifying a canon and system of literary hierarchy that many of us have worked to destabilize precisely through our work on minority writers who have been repeatedly excluded from the literary tradition. I don't have any answers yet to this conundrum, but I am grateful to Karen Weisman for this intricate, complex, and wonderfully researched volume, not only for its powerful readings, but also for pushing me to think more deeply about future possibilities for our collective literary methods in relation to Anglo-Jewish writers, and perhaps other minority poets as well.