

# From Idealistic to Realistic? Nineteenth Century Anglo-Jewry in the Texts of Grace Aguilar and Amy Levy

## Authors and Primary Texts

Both authors were Jewish.

Grace Aguilar (1816-1847)

Focal texts: 'Sacred Communings – Original and Selected' (1836) [MS], *The Perez Family* (1843), 'The Wanderers' (1845) and 'Dialogue Stanzas' (1845).

Aguilar wrote extensively on the religious history of Jews both in England and the Iberian Peninsular.

Amy Levy (1861-1889)

Focal texts: 'The Jew in Fiction' (1886), *Reuben Sachs: A Sketch* (1888), 'Cohen of Trinity' (1889) and 'A Ballad of Religion and Marriage' (n.d.).

Levy sought to present a more 'accurate' image of Jews in British Literature but was criticised for giving a negative view of Anglo-Jewry.

## Theory and Methodology

I take a historicist approach and seek to illuminate the texts by placing them in the context of contemporary literature, nineteenth century Anglo-Jewish society and British, Christian attitudes towards Jews.

From this, I hope to determine the literary and social background to Aguilar and Levy's texts, which may reveal why they wrote about Jews in the way they did.

I have engaged in close textual analysis and original archival research in the Jewish Museum of London.

## Argument

1) Both authors create distinctly Jewish characters to explore both the community itself and its relationship with the wider British community.

2) Levy and Aguilar have differing approaches to writing about their Anglo-Jewish communities.

- Their texts present different perceptions of Anglo-Jewry and of Judaism.
- Both engage differently with literary context: Aguilar fuses Jewish discourse with British Romanticism, whereas Levy seeks the realism associated with the later nineteenth century.
- They have different ways of engaging with the faith/ethnicity duality.

3) Each writer emphasises different aspects of Jewish identity to construct her characters: for Aguilar it is faith; for Levy it is the physical and social aspects.

The result is that Aguilar presents an idealised depiction of Anglo-Jewry, whilst Levy attempts to bring realism to the fore.

## Introspection      Assimilation

Self

Other

Text

Faith



Community

## Conclusions

Levy and Aguilar both construct a Jewish identity that is distinct from their contemporary British, Christian context, but with varying results.

Aguilar seeks to idealise the Jewish faith and people in her texts.

Levy is critical of the late nineteenth century's upper-middle-class Anglo-Jewry.

Both authors engage with contemporary literature with different results: one idealistic, one critical.

## Critical Debate

Research into these writers has been expanded in the last ten years.

Major critics include Galchinsky, Valman, Hetherington, Bernstein and Scheinberg.

Critical debate has largely focussed on Levy. This is divided into two portions: one which looks at her sexuality and one which examines her faith.

Work on Aguilar is rarer, although she is referred to in a number of studies.

There has been some notion of an emergence of a 'Jewish voice' from these texts. However, I disagree because Levy never truly engages with her predecessor's work.

Recently, Richa Dwor has examined both Levy and Aguilar and has argued that 'their work encapsulates a particularly Jewish mode of feeling'. I disagree with this because the authors actually engage with their contemporary literary spheres, rather than with one another.