
Reviewed by Lindsay Dearinger, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, USA.

“I, too, feel in transition, and I know not to what,” writes Florence Peyser in a letter to her lover at the close of Israel Zangwill’s story “Transitional” (462). First published in 1899 in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* and shortly thereafter reprinted in Zangwill’s collection “They That Walk in Darkness;” *Ghetto Tragedies*, “Transitional” aptly serves as the final story of the new anthology *Nineteenth-Century Jewish Literature: A Reader*, edited by Jonathan M. Hess, Maurice Samuels, and Nadia Valman. This confession by Zangwill’s idealistic Jewish protagonist underscores the ethos of the collection. While some of the authors promote more confidently than others their vision of a Jewish future in modern Europe, the sixteen stories collectively depict nineteenth-century European Jewry’s transition into modernity as predicated on feelings of uncertainty. The thirteen authors represented in the anthology illustrate Jews negotiating their place in European society at a time of modernization, and their characters experience varying degrees of success in their endeavors. Furthermore, *Nineteenth-Century Jewish Literature: A Reader* suggests a transition in Victorian literary studies: not only the inclusion of specifically Jewish texts, but also the use of stories written in European languages alongside of the literature of more well-known Anglo-Jewish authors.

The introduction situates the collection within a larger conversation concerned with tensions between Jewish tradition and modernity while expressly focusing on writings by German, French, and English Jews, a strategy that draws on the strengths of each editor. Jonathan M. Hess’s most recent works explore the relationship between popular fiction and German-Jewish identity, as well as the modernization of German Jews; Maurice Samuels recovers little known literature by French Jews in *Inventing the Israelite: Jewish Fiction in Nineteenth-Century France*; and Nadia Valman writes extensively on Victorian Anglo-Jewish identity, and much of her work examines Jewish women’s writings. Hess and Samuels provide
original translations of the German and French stories, many of which appear in English for the first time. The editors justify their exclusion of texts originally written in languages like Russian, Polish, Danish, Dutch, Ladino, Hebrew, and Yiddish from the collection, and instead showcase German, French, and English as the languages most associated with the modernization of nineteenth-century European Jewry. The general introduction and the introductions and footnotes to each story emphasize the importance of Western European vernacular languages to the development of modern Jewish identity. But this exclusion also corrects an imbalance in Jewish studies, shifting the focus on the sphere of Jewish literary activity from Eastern Europe to Western Europe. In recovering the origins of modern Jewish literature in the writings of nineteenth-century German, French, and English Jews, Hess, Samuels, and Valman demonstrate the ways in which Jews expressed their experiences with modernity before the 1880s.

The editors selected short stories and novellas that navigate four issues with particular relevance to nineteenth-century Jewish audiences: modernization, assimilation, national allegiance, and the status of women. For the benefit of readers without preexisting knowledge of Jewish history and religious customs, the introduction briefly outlines the unique processes of modernization, political emancipation, and religious reform in the featured European Jewish communities. The stories do not articulate a singular vision for reconciling Jewish tradition with the rapid modernization of the non-Jewish world; rather, each author engages the aforementioned themes differently, highlighting the interdisciplinarity of the collection. Moreover, the authors profiled here emulate and adapt literary styles popular with the majority cultures, justifying their place alongside canonical European authors.

The structure of the collection ghettoizes neither nationality nor gender. Rather than organizing the stories by the authors’ national identities or native languages, the editors divide the stories into four thematic sections: “Literature and the Invention of the Ghetto;” “Historical Fiction and the Sephardic Experience;” “Experiments in Jewish Realism;” and “Fictions of Religious Renewal.” Assigning the authors to national categories would undermine the project’s translinguistic design, and the editors avoid this issue by grouping the stories based on the ways in which the authors thematize Jewish modernization and negotiate Jewish identity. Historians usually view Jewish modernization, acculturation, and religious reform in England as distinct
from similar activities on the Continent, and the editors do not dispute this argument. Each introduction briefly situates its author nationally for the sake of context. However, the transnational purview of the collection emphasizes the fundamentally similar ways in which nineteenth-century Jews encountered modernity and constructed Jewish identity. The collection features a substantial number of female authors, and in so doing, acknowledges nineteenth-century Jewish women writers’ subversion of traditional Judaism’s male-centered relationship to text. Jewish women writers, like their non-Jewish counterparts, embraced the gendered dynamic of the literary marketplace and claimed a space for Jewish women’s textual production by emulating popular literary forms. The popularity of female authors like Grace Aguilar prompted a reevaluation of the tendency of Jewish culture to place sole importance on men’s study of sacred texts.

Each section presents a unified concept, though the authors interpret the concepts widely. “Literature and the Invention of the Ghetto” captures the distinctly Ashkenazi culture of insular European Jewish communities. This section is structurally symbiotic; the grouping of stories introduces the reader to what is likely the unfamiliar world of traditionally observant Jews, while each of the stories examines secular influences on its protagonists. “Historical Fiction and the Sephardic Experience” features both Ashkenazi and Sephardic authors re-imagining history in order to deal with the trauma of the Spanish Inquisition. Students of Victorian literature may find this section particularly enlightening due to the prominence of Sephardic communities in nineteenth-century England. “Experiments in Jewish Realism” highlights Dickensian plot device and structure in stories such as Zangwill’s “Anglicization” and Salomon Formstecher’s “The Stolen Son: A Contemporary Tale.” While certain plots engender almost miraculously positive endings that reinforce a strong sense of Jewish identity, many of the stories in this section strike an ambivalent tone, if not an outright bleak presentation of Jewishness, as is the case with Amy Levy’s “Cohen of Trinity,” and to some extent, Eugenie Foa’s “Rachel; or, The Inheritance.” Finally, “Fictions of Religious Renewal” advances widely diverse platforms for religious reform. Authors like Ben Baruch and his rival in letters Ben-Levi navigate seemingly contradictory messages; in “The Preacher and the Bellows,” the strictly orthodox philanthropist Ben Baruch
critiques the orthodox establishment, and in “The Fish and the Breadcrumbs,” Ben-Levi affirms reformist ideology via a critique of assimilation.

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of the collection is that, although the stories are placed into specific contexts, the stories reach across these boundaries, and the reader will find that the texts intersect thematically and structurally in almost limitless ways. Leopold Kompert’s “The Peddler,” Alexandre Weill’s “Braendel,” Foa’s “Rachel,” Levy’s “Cohen,” and Zangwill’s “Anglicization” probe the intersection between the consumption and production of literary texts and the process of modernization, or in some cases, its more extreme form, assimilation. Male and female writers alike depict active Jewish women characters, like Aguilar’s Almah, Foa’s Rachel, Weill’s Braendel, Samuel Gordon’s Zillah, and Sara Hirsch Guggenheim’s Aurelie, challenging the stereotype of the passive, oppressed Jewish woman. Additionally, Formstecher espouses the same anti-Catholicism as Aguilar, and Guggenheim emulates the same tropes of popular fiction as both Formstecher and Zangwill. Some writers present contrasting images of Jewish characters; for example, David Schornstein’s “The Tithe” idealizes small-town Jewish inhabitants, while the narrator of Levy’s “Cohen of Trinity” reads Cohen’s Jewish body as vulgar and degenerate. These examples are by no means exhaustive; I provide here merely a glimpse of the intertextual conversations to be found in the collection.

To me, the most remarkable conversation is that between the first and final stories, Kompert’s “The Peddler” and Zangwill’s “Transitional.” The editors’ decision to begin with Kompert’s ghetto story is inspired, especially given the near universal familiarity with the figure of the Jewish peddler. “The Peddler” opens in the middle of a poor family’s Shabbat preparations, an act that immediately, and unrelentingly, orients the reader to the Jewish religious world. Joy is tempered by grief as the family continues to mourn the son who left the ghetto and the faith for secular opportunities years before. Zangwill mirrors Kompert’s exploration of the emotional damage inflicted on families as a result of apostasy, but with an innovative twist: his apostate is a woman who makes an intellectually motivated choice to leave Judaism. By the end of the collection, the reader might feel distance from the ghetto; but the ghetto is ever present, and though Zangwill set “Transitional” in fashionable and industrial London, the central parent/child relationship hauntingly recalls that relationship featured in “The Peddler,” complete
with the fear and uncertainty of leaving the ghetto behind. As Florence ponders whether or not “the prosaic epoch of Judaism into which [she] was born is only transitional,” Zangwill, as well as Hess, Samuels, and Valman, invite the reader to embrace uncertainty and to reflect on the possibilities of a future for Judaism in modernity. Though the stories depict issues particularly relevant to Jewish culture, the authors demonstrate nuanced understanding of the conventions of nineteenth-century popular literature. The editors take care to explain unfamiliar terms and provide translations of foreign-language words, when necessary. This collection carries special appeal for scholars interested in Jewish and postcolonial issues, and as the connections outlined here suggest, will not only appeal to a wide range of scholars working in nineteenth century studies, but also those interested in minority cultures in Europe.