

# explorations



Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

## REVIEW

**Ilona Dobosiewicz. 2016. *Borderland: Jewishness and Gender in the Works of Amy Levy*. Opole: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego.**

*Marlena Marciniak (University of Opole)*

Amy Levy (1861-1889) may have seemed an enigmatic and vague figure in her contemporaries' eyes. A Jewish, lesbian, feminist, Cambridge-educated woman of letters subverted the traditional representation of Victorian woman in many ways. The questions of ethnicity, education, gender, sexuality and morality that converge in her life and writing, could constitute a fertile and fascinating field of exploration. Regrettably, Amy Levy's biography and oeuvre faded into obscurity after her premature, suicidal death. Her texts received little critical attention for more than one hundred years. Meri-Jane Rochelson (1996, 311) calls the writer "a troublesome footnote," while Richard Whittington-Egan (2002, 40) uses the phrase "this fragile ghost from the 1880s" to reflect her inconspicuous, amorphous place in the history of British literature. Only recently have scholars tried to rectify this unfortunate oversight and fill in the gaps in criticism and biography. Linda Hunt Beckman's *Amy Levy: Her Life and Letters* (2000), Christine Pullen's *The Woman Who Dared: A Biography of Amy Levy* (2010), and the collection *Amy Levy: Critical Essays* (2010) edited by Naomi Hetherington and Nadia Valman heralded the ongoing rise of interest in this intriguing and creative *fin-de-siècle* novelist, poet and essayist. Ilona Dobosiewicz's latest monograph *Borderland: Jewishness and Gender in the Works of Amy Levy* (2016) is a valuable and stimulating contribution to Levy's resurrection. Moreover, the volume is particularly welcome in the domestic publishing market, as it introduces the writer to Polish readers. The book contains both a comprehensive pen portrait of the writer and compelling analyses of her selected texts.

The first chapter focuses on biographical details which serve as a springboard for nuanced readings of Levy's literary output. Dobosiewicz recurrently highlights the significance of Levy's Jewish background, progressive education (especially at Cambridge) and homoerotic desires for shaping the woman's self-identity and creative talent. Furthermore, the author of *Borderland* rightly points to the ambivalent, heterodox status the young woman had in late-Victorian England: she was an assimilated Jew, open to Christian culture and capable of anti-Semitic reflections; a (seemingly) lesbian woman living in a community hostile to any sexual aberration; an independent, highly educated

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woman of letters struggling against the constraints of the patriarchal, manifestly sexist, social system. The life of Amy Levy, as presented by Ilona Dobosiewicz, appears to be a fascinating and intriguing story. Without idle speculation, she subtly goes beyond mere facts to reveal possible factors influencing Levy's frame of mind, intellectual pursuits and social views. Depiction of places, such as the Brighton High School for Girls, Newnham College, the British Museum, Florence, as well as people, for example Edith Creak, Eleanor Marx and Vernon Lee, playing crucial roles in the writer's experience, helps to outline a psychological profile of the complex, somehow contradictory personality, and prepares readers for a spiritual journey through of her writings.

Chapter two deals with the portrait of Jews emerging from Amy Levy's articles and fiction. After a brief historical sketch of the legal and social rank of Jews in England, Dobosiewicz gives an account of the Victorian debate on the so-called "Jewish Question," emphasizing the hybrid, inconsistent self-perception of Anglo-Jewry, and the protean character of approaches to Jewish communities. This tentativeness of self-awareness may be detected also in Levy's texts, which, on the one hand, manifest cognizance of her ethnic descent and heritage, but on the other hand, reveal her reprobation of Jewish narrow-mindedness as regards treatment of women, money and marriage. First, Dobosiewicz examines several of Levy's essays published in the *Jewish Chronicle* to reveal the tensions the writer felt while developing self-identity. Next, she submits to scrutiny the most popular novel by Levy – *Reuben Sachs* (1888). The great merit of the book lies in the realist description of various representatives of Anglo-Jewry, without either idealization or demonization. Dobosiewicz rightly deciphers the purport of Levy's work that the intricacy of Jewishness cannot be reduced to simplistic, black-and-white categories, or expressed in a nutshell. A similar argument surfaces in "Cohen of Trinity" (1889), a short story about an unsuccessful strife for recognition and acceptance among the British upper class of a young Jew, who resorts to suicide to communicate his depression and disappointment. What becomes apparent in Dobosiewicz's analyses is the sense of suspension and liminality experienced by Amy Levy and many other Anglo-Jews in Victorian England.

The third chapter discusses Amy Levy's stance towards changing women's roles in social life on the basis of chosen short stories, essays and two novels. It turns out that her prose was highly responsive to the transformation the notion of femininity underwent in the last decades of the nineteenth century: from a home-oriented, dependent, submissive wife and mother, to a free-thinking, self-reliant, working woman eager to benefit from the opportunities offered by city life. According to Levy, it was possible for women to find a balance between self-fulfillment in the domestic milieu and realization of one's aspirations in the public space, as three female protagonists of the novel *The Romance of a Shop* (1888) evidence. Dobosiewicz indicates that Levy enticed women to grasp the educational, professional and social chances awaiting in the metropolis. She gives examples of the Reading Room of the British Museum and various women's clubs as arenas facilitating exchange of ideas, self-progress, and consciousness rising.

The last part of the monograph is devoted to Amy Levy's poetry. In a skillful and appealing way Ilona Dobosiewicz throws light on the anxious wit and profundity of thought discernible in the poet's dramatic monologues and lyrics. The author of *Borderland* pays attention to the powerful appeal issued by Levy for recognition of women's (often unvoiced) needs, ambitions and passions in the world made by men. The title characters of "Xantippe," "Medea," and "Magdalen" symbolize female alienation,

marginalization and victimization, so familiar to Levy herself. The gynocentric nature of her musings is visible also in her lyric poetry. In the collection entitled *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse* (1889) the speaker celebrates myriad charms of the vibrant capital, accentuating the presence of women in urban space. In some poems the centrality of female experience acquires a homoerotic dimension. Dobosiewicz's minute scrutiny of such poems as "Sinfonia Eroica," "To Sylvia" and "The Dream" reveals that poetry functioned as an effective outlet for Levy's repressed sexual fascinations, inner conflicts and frustrations, which finally led to a tragic end.

Oscar Wilde once labelled Amy Levy as "a girl who has a touch of genius in her work" (Whittington-Egan 2002, 40), and *Borderland: Jewishness and Gender in the Works of Amy Levy* proves the point. Dobosiewicz's well researched, interdisciplinary and insightful book may be used as a source of reference and inspiration not only by specialists in Victorian studies, but also by researchers in cultural studies, Jewish studies, women's studies and gender studies, as well as by Amy Levy's verse and fiction (prospective) enthusiasts. Furthermore, there is great, vicarious pleasure to be gained from this well-organized, well-written and informative work. The volume is one of the very few pioneer revelations of the unjustly long-forgotten writer, plus it penetrates the working of one of the defining periods of English culture. Such publications leave both readers and scholars wanting more and urge further inquiry into convolutions of Victorian literature and culture.

#### REFERENCES

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**AUTHOR'S BIO:** Marlena Marciniak, PhD, is Assistant Professor at the Institute of English, Opole University. She specializes in Victorian fiction and culture, as well as gender studies, especially masculinity studies. She has published several book chapters and articles in academic journals on the Victorian concepts of fatherhood, married life and male homosocial relations, as well as on the nineteenth-century ideals of manliness. Last year she published her first book entitled *Towards a New Type of Masculinity: The Ideal of Gentlemanly Masculinity in Victorian Prose* (2015).

**E-MAIL:** marciniakm(at)uni.opole.pl