

THE POLITICS OF PLACE: URBAN FEMINISM
IN THE LATE WORKS OF AMY LEVY

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ABSTRACT

THE POLITICS OF PLACE: URBAN FEMINISM IN THE LATE WORKS OF AMY LEVY

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Amy Levy can be seen as a poet of modernity, of the time of dramatic change that made itself felt particularly in Western European cities in the 1880s and 90s. Much of Levy's work takes the city of London not only as its setting, but as its focus. In her works, she explores many issues that were beginning to affect the everyday lives and the ideas of people living in London at this time, including the place of women and Jewish people in society, and the place of people in this rapidly changing city. Though Levy's status as a feminist and as an urban poet have been established, my thesis furthers this work by arguing that there is a connection between these two vectors of her identity. Levy's politicization of female experiences and her discussion of urban modernity are inextricably linked.

Levy politicizes the city of London by showing how it was or was not accessible to women. She explores how increased mobility could confer on women increased intellectual and emotional freedom. While Levy affirms that the urban environment was

increasingly becoming a more liberating place for women, freeing them from the confining mores of the past, she also affirms that certain women are still confined within narrow spaces and mores even within the city. She identifies Jewish women, middle class women, and women who are both Jewish and middle class as particularly vulnerable to this kind of confinement.

I. INTRODUCTION

Amy Levy was an Anglo-Jewish poet born in 1861, whose most important works were written in the 1880s. Levy was known for embodying contemporary feminist ideals by freely exercising her ability to move from place to place in London's public sphere, and for her extensive use of London's public transportation. During much of Levy's adult life, she lived and worked in the city, particularly in public spaces, including the University Club for Women and the Reading Room of the British Museum. In a time when writing was still a non-normative vocation for a woman to pursue, Levy gleaned from these spaces both a workshop and a place to network with other writers (Beckman 82). Many of the women Levy met here – Eleanor Marx, Olive Schreiner, and Dollie Maitland Radford – became her closest friends, thereby enriching her personal life as well as her professional life.

The city of London features prominently in many of Levy's works, and is important to Levy both personally and in terms of writing, as scholars like Ana Parejo Vadillo have established. Many of Levy's poems are set in London, and moreover, engage with its changing geography in a direct and specific way. In *The Romance of a Shop* and *Reuben Sachs*, both published in 1888, near the end of her career, Levy writes of new innovations and improvements of the city such as the omnibus, and also of the city's new institutions, such as the Reading Room of the British Library and the new women's clubs, which were places where women could meet friends or professional

colleagues. Her final, most important collection of poetry was even named after the city of London: *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse*. Twelve of these fifty-one poems deal exclusively with London—with its sights and sounds, with the feelings it inspired in its inhabitants, and with the way people reacted to this changing organism: the city.

In the 1880s, when Levy was producing the works I will discuss, the relationship of women, particularly middle-class women, with the city was changing quickly. Previously, women had existed mainly in the home. In fact, the dominant ideology had long been that a woman's proper place was in the home, and that her proper duty was to care for her husband and children. This ideology affected middle-class women in particular, since they were the only women with husbands affluent enough to allow them to not hold jobs.

Despite this, women were also gaining more physical freedom in the 1880s, and were increasingly able to get out of their homes and enjoy the public spaces of London, due to technological innovations, such as the bicycle, and the growing popularity of the omnibus as a method of transportation. Ana Parejo Vadillo notes that by 1863 just a few years after Levy's birth, the omnibus had become radically cheaper in order to compete with the underground, which had recently been instituted (21). Thus, the prices of a trip on an omnibus, was now not only within the means of middle-class, but also within the means of much poorer women, with tickets as cheap as a two-penny return (21). Vadillo also notes that, by 1885, shortly before Levy writes the texts I will examine, the numbers of people using such transportation had drastically increased (21). Of course, this still would have excluded the poorest of poor women, those Levy's socialist friends attempted to help. In making it easier for them to move more quickly from place to place, public

transportation also allowed women many more social and intellectual freedoms. It allowed them to more readily choose the places they would go, and thus, to seek out places that would enrich their emotional and intellectual development. It also allowed them more choice in seeking out companionship. However, the writings of many middle-class women at this time illustrated that they did not feel as though their right to appear in the public spaces and institutions was assured. In fact, in 19th century literature and the contemporary periodical press, there was a heated debate between men who still ascribed to the ideology that women should remain in the home and the women who rejected this ideology, particularly women like Mona Caird, Olive Schreiner, and Amy Levy. Thus, Levy can be positioned within a larger context of middle-class women who advocated for greater societal acceptance of women's increased physical freedom through their writing.

Levy wrote about women in the city of London not only to depict the increased freedom they already had, but also to advocate women's increased participation in public life. Though my work, as implied by my title, which is an homage to Vadillo's *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity*, my work builds heavily on Vadillo's pioneering work, but differs in that I examine Levy's techniques as explicitly feminist. This is particularly visible in her later works and those that were published posthumously, such as her articles in the *Woman's World* and *Reuben Sachs*, which is recognized by many as her most important novel. Levy's feminist rhetoric in these works increase society's acceptance of women's freedoms by using the spaces of London as a metaphor and politicizing women's ability or inability to use public spaces, drawing attention to middle-class women's experiences of the city in particular.

The techniques Levy employed in her final works can be said to fall into three categories, the most advanced of which is exemplified in *Reuben Sachs*. The first category of feminist technique is relatively subtle, and appears in her articles “Women and Club Life” in the *Woman’s World* and “Readers at the British Museum” in *Atalanta*. Because she couches her advocacy for the expansion of women’s participation in public life as mere description of the level of participation were already allowed, she neutralizes the indictments of critics who would deem her work as too political. Levy’s poem “The Ballade of an Omnibus” and her short story “Eldorado at Islington” both exemplify a second strain of feminism. In these works, Levy uses working-class women to symbolize freedom in order to better illustrate the plight of bourgeois women who were confined to the home.

In *Reuben Sachs*, Levy employs the public and private spaces of the city in order to demonstrate that Jewish women, unlike most of the women she describes in her other late fiction, are not physically free to move about London, nor are they free to develop personally or intellectually. Levy argues in her essay, “Middle-Class Jewish Women” that women in Anglo-Jewish culture who feel constrained physically by their culture will either “beat themselves in vain against the masonry of our ancient fortifications” or “scale the walls,” leaving Jewish culture. *Reuben Sachs* represents the epitome of Levy’s feminism. She no longer uses either the symbol of working-class woman or the illusion of democratization of resources to make her critique of society seem less harsh. Rather, she overtly discusses the object of her concern, the physical and metaphorical confinement of middle-class women.

Levy's family was affluent enough to be as Linda Hunt Beckman says, "undeniably bourgeois" (85). Levy was born in 1861 to Jewish parents, Lewis and Isabelle Levy, both of whose parents had come to England in the eighteenth century (Beckman 13), placing them solidly in the realm of assimilated Jews, as opposed to Jews who had immigrated more recently. She was born in Clapham, a street Charles Booth identified as "middle-class, well-to-do" (Booth qtd. Pullen 15). Lewis Levy had cemented his status by discovering gold in Australia, an event which allowed him the resources to marry Isabelle, Levy's mother (Pullen 16). The fact that Levy was sent to Cambridge, where she was the first Jewish woman to attend, and the fact that she traveled extensively in her early adulthood to Germany, Switzerland, and Italy, illustrate the fact that her family was middle-class. Later in life, Levy lived alone in Endsleigh Gardens, and supported herself with her writing, a life which must have been hard to maintain. Levy still seems to have maintained middle-class status, however, as she once stated that she could never live without servants as did her socialist friend Clementina Black, admitting that "my own Philistine, middle-class notions of comfort would not be met by their ménage (Levy qtd. 235).

In her political life, Levy also exhibited a commitment to middle-class feminist values, as opposed to the socialist values of her friends. In 1889, Levy performed service as secretary of the WPPL, or Woman's Protective and Provident League, a socialist and feminist organization with which Black was affiliated (179). A notice in an issue of the *Woman's Union Journal*, the periodical associated with the WPPL, printed shortly after Levy's death stated that she was "a supporter of this League, and gave a donation in March last" ("In Memoriam" 8). Rosemary Feurer

identifies the concerns of the WPPL, saying that “the goal of widening the market for women’s labor is seen in the...fact that the WPPL kept applications from employers in their office, and the professed aim of ‘development of business habits’ for working women” (239). Levy’s involvement with the WPPL illustrates the fact that her activism was mostly concerned with middle class women.

In her early writings, Levy exhibited a feminism that though more idealistic than that of her later works, still exhibited a tendency to focus on middle-class women. When Levy was only seventeen, she wrote a letter to the editor of the *Jewish Chronicle* in response to another letter to the editor written by a man using the Hebrew letter “C”. Judging by Levy’s response, this man had significantly misunderstood the claims of the feminist movement. Levy writes that it is not “coercion into marriage” that women dread, but rather the “obstacles which are placed to hinder from attaining higher culture and from sharing in the sterner struggle of life, those women who, from circumstance or temperament, do not marry” (Levy qtd. Bernstein 171). In this letter, Levy demonstrates that it is not the social institution of marriage she finds repulsive, but rather, the confinement of women from reaching their potential. Levy also writes disapprovingly of the idea propagated by “C” that ‘women have their sphere’ and arguing that though men would condemn all [women] to the cares of domestic life and the performance of works of charity...I doubt if even the great thought of becoming in time a favorable specimen of the genus ‘maiden-aunt’ would be sufficient to console many a restless, ambitious woman...for the quenching of personal hopes for the development of her own intellect (Levy qtd. New 173).

Levy thus connects the impeded development of women with their physical confinement. This is a connection she would continue to make throughout her works.

After “C” responded to Levy’s letter, still misunderstanding the feminist movement, Levy wrote another letter correcting him, and showing the illogical nature of his ideas. For Levy to address this misogyny in such a public forum – writing to the editor advocating her feminist ideals – illustrates that Levy wanted to do more than just depict women’s struggles, as readers might be tempted to infer from her fictional works. The fact that she wrote two letters also reinforces this assertion. Levy wanted to change “C’s” ideas, and the ideas of other people about the place of women in society.

Levy’s early literary works, which she began to write when she was still in university, also focus on women’s experiences of place—either the experience of being confined within the home, or that of being free to move around. In 1881, Levy published “Xantippe” through the *Cambridge Review*, the literary magazine of Cambridge University, where she attended university. She also republished this poem, along with many new ones, in her first extensive volume, *A Minor Poet and Other Verse*, in 1884. In both volumes, Levy wrote about marginalized women such as Xantippe, the wife of Socrates, who laments being a “household vessel” (ll. 238) and “Medea,” the scorned wife of Jason, who is forced to remain in Greece, displaced in a land that is not her own. These early writings differ greatly from her later works, in that they deal with ancient women in faraway Greece, rather than exceedingly modern women in the city of London. They also differ in that they depict women who are alienated because they transgress the norms of their societies. While Judith in *Reuben Sachs* is a passive martyr, quietly forsaking her people and her love for the sake of custom, Xantippe is the classic scold,

constantly nagging her husband, and Medea kills her children to spite her former husband. Thus, the women Levy depicts in her early feminist works are aliens, both in action and in setting.

Levy's later work was set mainly in contemporary London, however. In 1888, Levy published *The Romance of a Shop*, whose most famous scene depicts Gertrude, the protagonist, "careering up the street on the summit of a tall, green omnibus, her hair blowing gaily in the breeze" (104), a scene which illustrates the freedom Levy sees women as able to gain from mobility in the city's public spaces. Twelve of the fifty-one poems in Levy's final volume of poetry, published posthumously, focused on the city of London exclusively. From this volume comes what is probably Levy's most studied poem, "The Ballade of an Omnibus," in which the speaker sees "the city pageant, early and late/Unfolds itself, rolls by, to be/A pleasure deep and delicate,/" and affirms that "an omnibus suffices me" (ll. 21-24). Once again, Levy depicts the freedom the city and its easy, quick transportation can give women. The status of both of these works as depictions of women's particular struggles in the 1880s has been well documented.ⁱ

Though *The Romance of a Shop* was published, as many of these works were, in the year 1888, the last year of Levy's life, I exclude it from analysis: first, because its representations of women have been analyzed at length; and second, because Levy herself said of *Romance* "it's as well to have the way paved for Reuben" (Levy qtd. Beckman 270), possibly indicating that Levy used the profits from this more generally appealing novel to finance the lean times she expected to have after the publication of a more ambitious, but perhaps less commercially successful work--*Reuben Sachs*. This

indicates that Levy did not consider *The Romance of a Shop* to be her most ambitious work.

Therefore, we can see *Reuben Sachs* as Levy's most ambitious novel, and her most ambitious engagement with feminist rhetoric. An in-depth study of the works Levy produced in the last two years of her career, and of her life, illustrates the development of the techniques she used in *Reuben Sachs*. This sort of study is also relevant because of the extremely controversial reception of the novel. Though its reception has been much discussed, scholars have never discussed the connection of that reception to the contemporary debate about women's rights. Studying the development of Levy's skill as well as critical reviews of *Reuben Sachs* illustrates that the overt nature of its feminist message constitutes a crucial part of the novel, and a crucial reason for its marginalization.

II. MRS. JELLYBY OR THE “TRIM YOUNG PERSON IN THE PINCE-NEZ”? AMY LEVY’S REDEFINITION OF WOMEN’S USE OF PUBLIC SPACE

In the 1880s, many women were to be seen in a wide variety of public places, rather than in the home. Judith Walkowitz discusses the development of many new institutions outside the home that were homosocial, or primarily intended for members of the same sex—women, to partake in together. These include going to department stores, settlement houses, and tea shops (45, 69). In addition to patronizing these new spaces, however, intellectual women also helped carve out new heterosocial spaces, such as discussion clubs, and infringed on spaces that were previously the exclusive domain of men, such as the reading room of the British Library (69). As they could choose to frequent these places, the act of doing so can be seen as empowering.

Judith Walkowitz identifies these discussion clubs as places that were “refashioned as a new political space for women” (70). Thus, they provided women who were concerned with issues such as the Woman Question or socialism with avenues for their ideas. However, as they usually took place in people’s homes, they also served the function of being liminal spaces that helped to bridge the gap between the home, woman’s traditional place, and the masculine spaces of the city that had largely been inhabited by men in the past. Walkowitz suggests that these discussion clubs could prepare women for greater participation in life outside the walls of the home, for the masculinized sphere of civic or professional life.

Levy frequented many places in the city of London that were outside the home that proved empowering to her as an intellectual woman. According to Susan David Bernstein, Levy was a member of the University Club for Ladies (Introduction. *Reuben Sachs* 21). Levy discusses the state of women's participation in these clubs, as well as the state of the general public's opinion on the phenomenon of female clubs in her essay "Women and Club Life" which was published in the first volume of the *Woman's World* in 1888.

In the *Woman's World*, Levy continued to write essays that considered the question of whether or not women were free to explore the city or to pursue vocations outside the home. In several of these works, she claims the city of London for women, powerfully asserting that women are already present in the city. However, her works in this magazine were acceptable critically because they were grounded in the context of the magazine, which also contains more normatively feminine content, such as articles about fashion. Their relative acceptance is also due to the fact that Levy stresses the fact that women are already equal in many ways to men, that she is merely describing the state of affairs, again allying her with the apolitical perspective of aestheticism. Levy uses similar techniques in the essay she published in *Atalanta* and in "The Ballade of an Omnibus". By asserting that her job is to be neutral, to describe, Levy successfully politicizes women's experiences of the city, and figures them as quintessential modern experiences, as valid as subjects of art as men's experiences.

To understand the context of the *Woman's World* and *Atalanta*, as well as the source of some of Levy's techniques in her late works, it is necessary to briefly define aestheticism and discuss some of its uses for female writers. Other scholars such as Ana

Parejo Vadillo and Kathryn Ledbetter position Levy within the realm of aesthetic discourse, the literary and cultural movement “occurring from the second half of the nineteenth century to the early part of the twentieth [and]...loosely connected to the phrase ‘art for art’s sake’” (*Women and British Aestheticism* 2). The movement as it existed in England, included in its early incarnations, the Pre-Raphaelite poets, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, and William Morris, as well as Charles Swinburne. In the 1880s and 90s, such well-known writers as Aubrey Beardsley, Max Beerbohm, and Oscar Wilde came into the forefront of the movement. In particular, Walter Pater helped to theorize the movement. In his tract, *The Renaissance Studies in Art and Poetry*, Pater says that “the aesthetic critic, then, regards all the objects with which he has to do, all works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar and unique kind” (Pater qtd. *Broadview Anthology of Victorian Literature* 634). Therefore, the movement does not merely attempt to produce beauty, but also to pay particular attention to beauty’s effect on the psyche, and to theorize which kind of objects produce it.

According to Talia Schaffer, because many scholars have conflated aestheticism with decadence, understanding it as a movement that marginalized women, they have assumed that women would not have taken part in the aesthetic movement. Though indeed, Wilde, Beerbohm, and Beardsley are today among the most well-known of aestheticism’s practitioners, Schaffer argues that the decadence was a “brief, defensive reaction of embattled male writers who perceived themselves to be losing status to women writers and consequently fetishized their own decay” (*Forgotten* 6). Schaffer argues, however, there is another side to aestheticism that was equally important to the

movement during the 1880s and 90s, and that has been overlooked by subsequent scholars of the movement—a female side. According to Schaffer, aestheticism was, at least in part, a movement in which women did take part, and which offered a way to discuss controversial subject matter under the guise of beautiful language (*Forgotten* 21). Women found a platform for this acceptable brand of aestheticism in the periodical, *Woman's World*, a magazine that Oscar Wilde edited from 1887 to 1890 (Ledbetter 137), though other magazines such as *Atalanta* partook of aesthetic style as well.

The periodical *Atalanta* must also be considered in depth as a context for Levy's essay. Firstly, *Atalanta* was a periodical defined by its audience, young women. More specifically, the rules of *Atalanta's* scholarship and Reading Union, which offered scholarships to young women for writing essays on literature, stipulated that only girls aged twenty-one and under could enter. The Dictionary of Nineteenth Century Journalism identifies *Atalanta* as an “ambitious, advanced periodical for girls and young women” (Mitchell). *Atalanta* was also, as was the *Woman's World*, a periodical that emphasized aestheticism. As the header for the “Scholarship and Reading Union” illustrates, *Atalanta* often emphasized a Pre-Raphaelite aestheticism, which just as in the *Woman's World*, existed side-by-side with its feminist content.. This once again illustrates that Levy's feminist message was not incompatible with her aesthetic techniques for evading criticism. Levy's essay probably illustrated to the young women reading *Atalanta* that the Reading Room is already a place for women, a singularly empowering message, conveyed in such a way that Levy herself avoided criticism for propagating it.

Atalanta would also have been relatively accessible in terms of price, as it only charged six pence for its monthly issue (Mitchell). “Readers at the British Museum,” by

its grounding in *Atalanta*, was an essay that could have been read by girls of much more diverse class backgrounds, making its message truly democratic. Levy's participation in this magazine as well as *Atalanta* establishes that for a time her work successfully negotiated the marginalization she might have faced as a feminist by working within a brand of aestheticism that was acceptable for women to use. In articles and short stories such as "Women and Club Life," and "Eldorado at Islington," published in the *Woman's World*, Levy uses the construction of the city to explore both the extent of physical freedom women have in the city and the freedoms women did or not have to define their identities professionally and personally. She frequently staves off criticism, however, by invoking aestheticism's political neutrality, saying that she is merely describing situations, or problems, rather than advocating for their amelioration.

On November 15, 1882, still early on in her career, Amy Levy got her reader's ticket to the British Museum, another institution that would prove singularly important for her personal life and her career (Beckman 296). Levy's use of the Museum is another example of her use of the city's spaces for intellectual endeavors. The extensive museum included a library, whose reading room became an important spot for intellectual women such as Levy to network with other women. Indeed, Linda Hunt Beckman suggests that it was possibly at the museum that Levy met many of the female friends with whom she would later meet in the discussion group I mentioned previously. She also met the influential New Woman, Olive Schreiner, and the socialist Eleanor Marx, who would become one of her best friends, there (79). Both likely influenced her views, and possibly her writing. It is notable that the reviewer from the *Woman's Herald* compares the writing of Levy and Schreiner, saying that because her novel *Reuben Sachs* "says so

much by not saying,” it reminds one of the “author of African Farm [Olive Schreiner]” (8). In addition to the possibility it offered for networking, the British Museum also offered Amy Levy a place to research and write (Bernstein 16).

Though the reading room Levy knew had been opened in 1857, there had been various arrangements made for readers at the museum since 1759, only six years after its opening in 1753 (Readers 450). Thus, as Levy herself acknowledges, the library had always been an integral part of the museum, as had the capacity for extended, in-depth study provided by an area dedicated to that purpose in the museum. However, the reading room Levy used was only instituted in 1857, marking it as a decidedly modern development. Levy considers the reading room’s status as both an established and a modern institution at length in her essay, providing the basis for her discussion of women’s already established use of the space as an established fact of the modern reading room, a strategy which kept her work from being viewed as overtly political.

Until recently the library’s importance as a national institution has been couched in terms of the important literary men and male thinkers who have graced it with their presence. Levy herself mentions Johnson and Hume as among its members (Readers 450). Famously, Virginia Woolf recognized it as a “bastion of outmoded sexist male scholarship” in *A Room of One’s Own* (“Radical Readers” 1). Thus, the reading room was acknowledged as important because it was allied with the male scholarly establishment as a “knowledge-producing institution” (Foucault qtd. Hoberman 169). However, many women who have now been recognized as important, but overlooked female writers, such as Levy, acquired membership nevertheless. This offered them an invaluable resource in their scholarship, writing, and lives as progressive women. Ruth Hoberman

acknowledges that, until recently, scholars have also overlooked the importance of women readers at the Museum. It is evident from the numbers of women who acquired membership cards--twenty percent of readers in 1884--that the library was relatively accessible to women in the fin-de-siècle. Indeed, the gaining of an official membership to the Library had never been difficult. Rather than charging a fee like subscription libraries, the reading room at the British Museum required only a letter of sponsorship written by the head of a household as a condition of membership (“Radical Readers” 2).

Membership among women had always been relatively slight until the nineteenth century, particularly, the last decades of the nineteenth century (Hoberman 171). Until then, women had been informally discouraged by the sense that it was not “etiquette” to patronize the male reading room, and had never needed the official discouragement of regulation. As use of public transportation and bicycles among women increased, women were getting out of the home more, allowing them to better use such resources, and to be more used to transgressing public male space. Perhaps these factors were part of what increased their use of the British Museum’s reading room.

This increased usage did not signal men’s approval of their using them, though, and indeed, resulted in a barrage of negative comments about women readers in the mainstream periodical press. Though Susan David Bernstein argues persuasively for the accessibility of the reading room, it seems that though there was a marked absence of official regulation of women’s presence in the reading room, they joined in spite of the wishes and informal attempts at regulation by male readers. Indeed, men did not see the female students as equals, and made attempts to discourage them from joining by segregating them from male readers, and regulating their access to certain study materials.

Indeed “two long tables” were set apart for women only in the Museum, providing a visible distinction between the purportedly frivolous women readers and the male readers, who were considered to be undertaking serious purposes (“Radical Readers” 9) . In addition, though women were allowed to be present in the museum, officials did make attempts to regulate their access to materials. Eleanor Marx was purportedly furious upon realizing that the Kama Sutra “was locked up and refused to women” (Unsigned letter qtd. “Radical Readers 9).

In Levy’s article, “Readers at the British Museum,” she depicts women as already present in the museum’s reading room. However, Levy never foregrounds female use of the Reading Room, rather incorporating women democratically within her essay and in the composition of the pictures she employs. This technique serves the purpose of making Levy’s feminist message less overtly political, and therefore more acceptable. In this piece, she complicates this assumption on the part of male readers, and asserts that despite the disapprobation of men, women were actually doing quite serious work in the Reading Room, claiming its space for female use. Rather than advocating for women’s increased use of the space, Levy suggests that they already are using it, couching her feminist message indirectly.

Levy’s essay, “Readers at the British Museum” is in part, an informative article on the history of the museum. This makes sense in light of *Atalanta*’s status as a magazine for girls. The piece includes information about its institution and the developments of the succession of reading rooms. Levy also gives information about the reading room’s more well-known readers of the past. In Levy’s reading room, however, the past is still almost tangible. The “suggestive scent of leather bindings” pervades

Levy's reading room, some of which include "a hitherto undiscovered edition of *The Canterbury Tales* printed in 1498,...a first edition of Shakespeare's dramatic works,...and the only known fragment of the New Testament in English, translated by Tyndale and Roy, printed in 1525 at Cologne, when the translators had to interrupt the printing and flee for their lives" (450). Levy describes some archaic readers as well, such as the "dry-as-dust, paper-laden old scholar of illustrations" (448). As discussed before, this past was dominated by men. Levy delineates famous male scholars from the Museum's past, mentioning in particular Johnson and Hume. Levy notably does not mention any men from more recently than a hundred years before 1889, when Levy's article was published, aligning men with the past. She does not contest the presence of the past, or the male scholars who are aligned with that past, in the Reading Room. Rather, she affirms that while women were largely left out of that past, they will be a part of the Reading Room's future.

However, Levy's article juxtaposes these relics of a bygone age with the modern developments of the newest reading room, instituted in 1857. In this way, Levy engages with the current of optimism and excitement about modern developments, with which she aligns women, while also evoking a powerful sense that the male-dominated past is still present in this place. Levy says that the scholar mentioned previously and "the trim young person in the *pince-nez* jostle one another," under the same "lavender-white light of the electric lamps" (448). The person in the *pince-nez*, a woman and the old scholar, a man, are juxtaposed on the same page of text, one on the upper left, and one on the bottom right (See Figures 1 and 2). The number of illustrations depicting women and

those depicting men are virtually equal, and dispersed alternately throughout the piece, lending the room a democratic air.

In this modern Reading Room, under the benediction of the electric lights, symbols imbued with optimism about the future, women and men can coexist. Just as the lights provide the scholars the modern opportunity of studying for an extended time, and with better accuracy, the coexistence of men and women provides the library with a new kind of democracy, which she thus constructs as desirable. Levy laments that Samuel Johnson could not have access to the reading room she and her compatriots enjoy, as “with its opportunities for gossip and lounging, Dr. Johnson would have been in his element” (Readers 450). Thus, Levy is not advocating women’s greater use of the reading room, but subtly characterizing this new, modern Reading Room as better for the fact that women already use it.



Figure 1 (at top-left of original page)

“Readers at the British Museum,” *Atalanta: Every Girl’s Magazine* 7



Figure 2 (at bottom right of original page)

"Readers at the British Museum," *Atalanta: Every Girl's Magazine* 7

Though Levy does note that “many people have no scruple in taking up the time of the officials, or crowding out genuine workers from the desk in pursuit of such futilities as answers to word-competitions, chess problems, or mere novel-reading,” she does not specify that these people are women, like the men who wrote complaints in the periodical press (Readers 452). Though Levy laments what she characterizes as “abuse” of the employees’ time and the library’s resources, she ultimately signals her approval of the egalitarian nature of the place.

Levy claims the public spaces of London for women in her essay by using the assumed political neutrality associated with the aesthetic style and the essay format in order to assert that she is merely describing the reality of women’s participation in public life, rather than advocating for its increase. By claiming that she is merely describing reality, Levy succeeds in constructing the position of women who patronize clubs as normative, rather than different. She is therefore able to neutralize opposition to her claims, by arguing that the state she describes already exists. In contrast to the way Levy describes club life, she uses various techniques to marginalize the opinions of conservative readers who believed that women’s place was in the home. In this essay, Levy argues that the subject of women’s presence in the public sphere is no longer up for debate. By arguing that women are already present in the public sphere, Levy says that those who wish women to remain in the home are not wrong, they are just in denial.

The context of the *Woman’s World* is also important to an understanding of Levy’s work in this periodical. Wilde transformed the *Woman’s World* from its former identity as the *Lady’s World* in 1887 (Ledbetter 137). According to Schaffer, critics can view *Woman’s World* as an “aesthetic manifesto,” that describes an “already feminized

realm” of writing, an alternative to the *Yellow Book*, still recognized as the primary magazine of the aesthetic style (*Forgotten* 2). Schaffer’s statement that aestheticism was an “already feminized realm” implies that women were not only allowed to participate in it; it was designated as an area of the style that was wholly their own, and in which they were not subjected to the intense scrutiny and criticism women writers usually suffered with respect to the subjects they chose to address.

This allowed women to be able to explore feminist issues at greater length in the magazine. Indeed, this was part of Wilde’s professed aim in creating the magazine. He transformed the magazine from its former identity as the *Lady’s World* in 1887, at least in part, because he wanted it to “deal not merely with what women wear, but what they think, and what they feel” (Wilde qtd. Ledbetter). He wanted to make it “more womanly” and less feminine (Wilde qtd. Ledbetter 137). The range of articles published in the *Woman’s World* exemplifies the fact that the eclecticism that Wilde sought, the eclecticism of female aestheticism, could be freeing from the conventions dictating what “women’s writing” was and what it was not. Compared to aestheticism as practiced by men, the aestheticism of *Woman’s World* undertakes a greater engagement with the ideas and concerns of women, which ranged from the idealization of the beautiful to the discussion of the political aims of feminism.

The magazine certainly contained articles on aspects of women’s culture that were deemed normative. Kathryn Ledbetter has identified the fact that this brand of aestheticism concerned itself greatly with the idea of feminine beauty. The magazine printed such articles as “Scent and Scent-Bottles and Lace-Making in Ireland”—articles that would have had a wide appeal among women as they discussed aspects of women’s

personal beautification regimens and of the process of beautifying the home-- two areas that would have been seen as distinctly feminine (*Woman's World* vol. 2). The magazine also printed poems and short stories that exemplified the creed of "art for art's sake" by employing beautiful language and beautiful subject matter. These include Edith Nesbit's "Blush Roses." The decorative elements surrounding this poem, as well as the poem's traditionally feminine subject matter—flowers--make it a prime example of the kind of aestheticism the *Woman's World* represented.

However, there were also many articles that dealt with aspects of women's lives that were markedly political, but which were made acceptable in the context of the magazine's feminine aestheticism. Indeed, many women who wrote for the aesthetic *Woman's World* were first and foremost, recognized members of feminist movements, or other activist movements, or wrote texts more widely recognized by scholars today as feminist. Prime examples are some of the same women I mentioned earlier as among Levy's closest friends--Olive Schreiner, whose work such as *The Story of an African Farm*, and "The Buddhist Priest's Wife" marked her as a woman eminently concerned with women's rights, and Dollie Maitland Radford, who was active in the WPPL an organization that attempted to help women get jobs. All of these women held and acted on strong political beliefs, while their participation in *Woman's World* marks them as aesthetes in terms of literary style. Schaffer also discusses certain "self-defensive literary techniques" used by female aesthetes in order to evade marginalization (*Forgotten* 5). In the *Woman's World*, Levy uses such techniques, asserting continually that she is not passing judgment on the events she describes.

Levy frames the body of her essay with a discussion of the opinions of the general public about club life. In the beginning of her essay, Levy argues that opinions have changed dramatically. Levy primes her readers for an historical perspective by beginning her essay with a quotation from George du Maurier's article, "Female Clubs vs. Matrimony," which appeared in the magazine *Punch* in 1878, ten years before her own article. *Punch's* treatment of women usually construes their attempts at greater physical freedom as humorous and ill-fated, adopting the decidedly political view that women should remain in the home. This article is no exception. The sketch illustrates two women conversing in a club, about the fact that one of them cannot stay for dinner because "my sainted old father-in-law's just gone back to Yorkshire, and poor Bolly's [her husband] all alone," (532). In the accompanying picture, the second woman is depicted in a position of extreme exasperation, slumped in a chair, and according to the caption, animated by a "sigh of regret for the freedoms of Spinsterhood and the charms of club life" (532). In this article, women's participation in "the charms of club life" is depicted as mutually exclusive of her status as a married woman.

By referencing this article, Levy positions her article as an updated response to this essay, arguing that the public now views female clubs as a normal component of women's lives—lives that may also include matrimony. She says "It is not ten years since the appearance of this little bit of dialogue and its accompanying sketch in the pages of *Punch*, and already the world has drifted into a stolid acceptance of the fact of feminine club life" (Levy 364). Levy establishes immediately that women's presence in clubs is already a reality, making her essay appear informative, rather than threateningly political.

The illustrations of Levy's article also reinforce the idea that women's participation in club life was normal. There are many different kinds of women represented, and one picture even includes a man, a priest. In particular the illustration captioned "Strong-minded lady meets female friend" shows that that women who attend clubs exemplify a range of different types of femininity.

The content of the body of Levy's essay, however, suggests that she is subtly attempting to convert female readers who may not yet belong to one of these clubs, seemingly contradicting the idea that club membership is widespread. This suggests that Levy knew the mainstream of women still did not belong to clubs, and that one purpose in writing the article might have been to illustrate the value of club membership as a physically, and therefore, emotionally liberating activity for women. In this portion of the essay, Levy describes the features of the existing clubs for women, as if to recruit more women to their numbers. She discusses a range of clubs intended for a range of women with different economic statuses. While the Alexandra Club attempted to exclude any woman who "has been or probably would be precluded from attending Her Majesty's drawing-rooms" (365), charging an annual subscription of "three and two guineas for town and country members, respectively," the University Club for Ladies aimed for the patronage of "the working woman," charging a guinea, and ten shillings, respectively (365-66). By discussing a range of clubs that cater to different classes, Levy describes clubs as places for all women—places that could liberate them intellectually and prepare them for greater participation in public life.

However, George Landow asserts that the guinea was a "nonexistent denomination worth twenty-one shillings, or a shilling more than a pound" that was used

to price “obviously class-based items” (Landow). This suggests that a subscription to the University Club could not have been afforded by the working-classes. Furthermore, though Oscar Wilde did change his magazine’s name from the *Lady’s World* to the *Woman’s World*, in part to indicate its suitability for women of classes other than the nobility, Anna Clayworth asserts that the magazine’s price, a shilling, indicates that it was mainly marketed toward “middle and upper-class ladies” (Clayworth). This illustrates that Levy was not actually propagating a vision that was attainable for all women, bringing her closer to focusing on middle-class women’s experience, as she explored them in *Reuben Sachs*.



STRONG-MINDED LADY AND FASHIONABLE FRIEND MEETING
AT THE CLUB.

Figure 3
“Women and Club Life,” *Woman’s World* 1

In the final part of her essay, Levy returns to examining the opinions of the general public with regard to women's clubs. However, this time, rather than asserting that popular opinion is on the side of the women's club, she considers, and then negates conservative opinions. Levy does this by constructing fictional images of women who employ clubs, and then negating them. She returns specifically to the sketch she references in the beginning of the essay, but this time treats it as though it exemplified contemporary beliefs. Levy argues that "there is no reason to suppose that ladies have been led away into any of those extravagances prophesied by Mr. du Maurier and other humorists" (366). She continues, affirming that

the female club-lounger, the flâneuse of St. James's Street, latch-key in pocket and eye-glasses on nose, remains a creature of the imagination. The clubs mentioned are sober, business-like haunts enough, to which no dutiful wife or serious-minded maiden need feel ashamed of belonging (366).

Levy once again asserts that wifedom and club membership are not mutually exclusive. She also contrasts the image of the real women who belong to these clubs with another image, that of the flâneuse of St. James Street. Levy constructs an imaginary woman who is defined by the act of looking at the city, emphasizing that this woman wears glasses on her nose. Levy then contrasts the image of the real club woman as one defined by observance of duty and sobriety, by keeping her eyes down. Levy suggests that the imaginations of the critics of clubs are what is to blame, Levy then inhabits the role of an imaginary conservative critic, who asks

“You have dismissed Trixy Rattlecash and Julia Wildrake...but do you hold up anything so admirable after all? Is Cornelia Blimber elbowing her way into a man’s club-room such an edifying spectacle, when all is said? Is it such a beautiful thing that Mrs. Jellyby should absent herself from home at all hours of the day, or the Princess Ida take to haunting the neighborhood of Bond Street? (366)

In this paragraph, Levy references a *mélange* of fictional women—the two women from the sketch again, Cornelia Blimber and Mrs. Jellyby from Dickens’ *Dombey and Sons*, and *Bleak House*, respectively, and Princess Ida from Gilbert and Sullivan’s opera of that name from 1884. All of these women are absurd caricatures of “advanced” women. Several are intellectual, while Mrs. Jellyby was known for her philanthropic work in Africa. All of them are known for neglecting traditional womanly duties, and pursuing lives lived mainly in the public sphere, whether in universities or charity meetings. Thus, Levy associates the opinion that women should remain in the home with fictional characters, rather than with real women. Levy employs this strategy in order to suggest that such critics base their opinions about women on literature, rather than on life.

Of all of these women, Gilbert and Sullivan’s Princess Ida is the only one who is from within ten years of when Levy wrote this article. The Dickens characters are from approximately fifty years before she wrote this article. Levy once again marginalizes the opinion this imaginary critic—the opinion that women should remain at home—by associating it something that does not exist--the past.

Levy finally resumes her former assertion that she is merely describing reality, rather than acknowledging the political basis of her argument. She couches her final

argument in the objective language of economics. In reply to the objections of conservatives based on the fictional female characters previously mentioned Levy says “I can only say that I am considering things as they are, not as they might be” (367). A few lines later, she affirms again “It is not for me to rejoice over, or to deplore, the complete and rapid change of the female position which has taken place in this country during the last few years. It is a phenomenon for our observation rather than an accident for our intervention” (367). Levy concludes by stating again that there is no debate, there are only those who see what is going on around them, and those who do not, people whom Levy suggests are either living in the past, or in a fictional world. By asserting that women are already taking advantage of club life, Levy claims modern public life as a phenomenon for women’s enjoyment. However, once again, Levy’s article is decidedly classed, a factor which she herself would come to acknowledge more openly in her works, “Eldorado at Islington” and “The Ballade of an Omnibus.”

III. “HEAVEN HELP” THE LADIES: LEVY’S MIDDLE-CLASS FEMINISM

In addition to using the democratization of public space as a theme in her works, Levy also uses the figure of the working-class woman as a symbol of contrast to the confined woman of the bourgeoisie, acknowledging more directly her desire to depict middle-class struggles.

In addition to depicting the ways in which certain spaces in the city can empower women, either by enriching their intellectual or emotional lives, Levy also depicts London as empowering merely by virtue of the fact that middle-class women could get around it easily and quickly. Women do not have to stay in one place too long, but have the possibility to move from one place to another as they wish, escaping the confining regulations of any one institution. Thus, women find freedom in liminality, in the possibility inherent in being mobile.

Levy also writes about the omnibus, a form of transportation she took frequently, to symbolize this liminality. It allowed her to see and absorb all of the sites of the city in quick succession, without having to experience them all individually. The term *flâneur* seems to apply to Amy Levy, and to her persona in this poem. Walkowitz defines the word *flâneur*, coined by Baudelaire, as a “new social actor” who was characterized by the desire to “experience the city as a whole” (16). She notes that the term also connotes “a powerful streak of voyeurism” (16).

For women, being a *flâneuse*, the male counterpart of the *flâneur*, also connoted an aspect of transgression. Levy's position as a *flâneuse* has significant meaning for the women about whom she wrote, as it implies power, a power that she symbolically confers on them through their reading. Indeed, Levy watched and took pleasure in watching the city's goings-on. She is known particularly for the pleasure she took in traveling across the city in omnibuses, an act that is symbolic of the *flâneuse*'s possession of the city. Not only did she ride on omnibuses, which after all, was fairly common, but she also rode on the tops of omnibuses, a practice that connoted both daring and a disregard for custom (Pullen 14). Levy dispatched with the reaction of "her shocked family circle," when they confronted her about her omnibus habit by saying "that she had committed the outrage in the company of the daughter of a dean, who was also the daughter of the Archbishop of Canterbury" (Solomon qtd. Pullen 14).

Amy Levy's poem, "Ballade of an Omnibus" was published first in the *Star* in 1888, and then in her final volume of poetry, *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse* after her death in 1889. Ana Parejo Vadillo has noted the prevalence of the omnibus as a symbol of mobility for Levy--one that allowed her to experience the city at a new speed. This poem stands as Levy's most extended literary engagement with the omnibus. Levy constructs the speaker's experience of travel as characterized by the ability to take advantage of institutions and systems that are becoming increasingly democratized. In this poem, Levy expresses her dissatisfaction with the lot of middle-class women by idealizing working-class women. This once again can be seen as a strategy of making her

politicization of women's experiences less obvious, to avoid marginalization, by instead focusing on the class of the woman.

Levy begins by describing various well-off characters and their modes of transportation. Levy's persona says that "Some men to carriages aspire;/On some the costly hansoms wait;/Some seek a fly, on job or hire;/Some mount the trotting steed, elate" (ll.) Levy's persona then says that she "env[ies] not the rich and great" (ll. 5). In these lines, Levy's persona tellingly says that it is "some men" who use these expensive modes of transportation, associating men with wealth and power. In using the pronoun "some," Levy implies in the statement that she is not one of the "rich and great," but rather characterizes herself as a "wandering minstrel, poor and free" (ll. 6). Levy positions her persona as a minstrel, a poet who sings for the common people, in opposition to the great men. She continually asserts the difference between herself and rich, powerful men by alluding to figures such as Croesus, Lucullus, a general famous for his luxurious banquets, and an unnamed "Princess" whose names evoke associations of extreme wealth automatically, and stating that she does not envy them (ll. 15). Thus, Levy's persona characterizes herself as merely a passenger, not a woman, drawing attention away from her difference. She aligns herself with the mainstream of humanity instead, those who are poor and free, rather than those who are rich and high in terms of class.

Though taking the omnibus might at first appear an act of asceticism on the part of the persona, Levy's speaker makes it clear that this is not the case. The adjectives "poor" and "free," which describe the poet persona are linked with a coordinating conjunction, indicating that the two adjectives have equal importance in describing her.

Neither the great men nor the reader should pity her lack of wealth. In the second to last stanza, Levy's persona says that

The human tale of love and hate,
The city pageant, early and late
Unfolds itself, rolls by, to be
A pleasure deep and delicate.
An omnibus suffices me.

Levy's characterization of her persona as both poor and free illustrates once again her focus on middle-class women. Though as previously stated, omnibuses had decreased their fares drastically, they would still have likely been too expensive for some women to take for sheer pleasure. Reynolds' Shilling Colored Map of London, a map of London made in 1871, includes a tourist guidebook which states that most fares were either two or three pence for "part of the distance" or five or six pence for the whole distance ("Reynolds' Shilling Map"). Though many women were unable to employ public transportation, and therefore, were not physically free, Levy idealizes the state of poverty, aligning it with freedom. It is necessary to remember that Levy's depictions of women taking advantage of the pleasures of London's social spaces were undoubtedly depictions of middle-class women, such as herself. Even if working-class women had the means to exercise the degree of mobility Levy does, they likely do not have the leisure to enjoy such pursuits, as they were already using the city's spaces for work.

In the next stanza, the persona says that the "'busmen know me and my lyre" (ll. 11). This statement also takes on a particular importance if one assumes that the persona is female. The omnibus not only creates a sense of freedom at being outside the home,

but also the possibility of a more heterogeneous social circle for women. Normally, it was considered improper for women to have relationships with men that were not initiated by an introduction from either a family member, or the hostess of a party. An example of the social consternation that women incurred when they did not follow these rules can be found in Levy's *The Romance of a Shop*. When the four orphaned protagonists "scrape... acquaintance with" a young man who lives across from them, their aunt, who is markedly old-fashioned is shocked (106) These relationships were expected to be within the woman's social class, and to fit neatly within the boxes of either relative, husband, future husband, or family friend.

The 'busmen fulfill none of these categories. The minstrel has no interest in common with the 'busmen other than needing to be conveyed somewhere on the transportation that the 'busmen run. This relationship seems similar in structure to one a woman might have had with servants, as they are performing a service for her by running the omnibus, but it is unlike such a relationship in several key ways. Theirs appears to be a casual relationship in which social class is not an important factor, and in which none of the traditional categories in which women would relate to men apply. The persona has initiated a relationship with a man based not on the economic gain she hopes to get from it, as in relationships between women and fathers, women and husbands, or women and servants. This ability to initiate casual relationships with those of the opposite sex, without the mediation of a male relative or a chaperone is one of the facets of women's lives that was quickly changing at this time.

Thus, it is precisely the human aspect of the "city pageant" that she enjoys. In characterizing the city as a pageant that "unfolds itself" Levy emphasizes the idea that the

city's people provide a show that her seat on the omnibus allows her to see play out. Furthermore, Levy says that this scene "rolls by, to be/A pleasure deep and delicate," which signifies that it is not merely a coincidence that Levy's persona sees it. Rather, the scene plays out "to be," for the purpose of being "a pleasure deep and delicate" to her. This portion of the poem reveals the ability of Levy's persona to view people from the omnibus to be the center of her reason for enjoying this mode of transportation. Her insistence that the bus exists to provide women with a platform from which to view this human pageant illustrates the degree to which the character of the flâneuse was a reality in *fin-de-siècle* England. It was a reality for Levy, as a middle-class woman who could afford it. Levy evades overt politicization on the basis of her sex in this poem by constructing the physical mobility symbolized by the city of London as something that is democratic, and may be enjoyed by all people—even though this is not necessarily the case.

Conversely, she constructs bourgeois convention symbolized by the suburb of Islington as an institution that constricts female mobility. Levy contrasts the mobility of women such as these with that of the protagonist in her short story "El Dorado at Islington," published in Volume 2 *Woman's World* in 1889. While the women in the others of Levy's works that I have examined are thrillingly mobile, the protagonist of this story is painfully constricted by her home in the suburb of Islington. Deborah Epstein Nord notes that in Woolf's *The Pargiters*, young women have difficulties traveling from the suburbs of London to East London in order to do social work (183). As a suburb of London, Islington also suffers from the lack of ease of mobility that women in the city enjoy. There is evidence that Levy recognized this quality of the suburbs herself as she

wrote in a letter to Vernon Lee, her aesthetic lover that “somehow those girls from the streets, with short and merry lives, don’t excite my compassion half as much as small bourgeoisie shut up in stucco villas at Broxbury or Islington. Their enforced respectability seems to me really tragic” (letter 31 qtd. Beckman). To Levy, the suburb of Islington symbolized confinement because its residents occupied London’s economic middle ground, as opposed to the lower ground of East London.

El Dorado at Islington tells the story of a bourgeois young woman who is constrained because she occupies this economic middle ground. Unlike the protagonist of “The Ballade of the Omnibus,” she is not able to take advantage of working women’s social opportunities, and yet not rich enough to thoroughly enjoy her life through travel or consumption. The story opens on a woman named Eleanor looking out of a window. Readers are told that Eleanor could see “not only the wall and the plane-trees, but, by dint of craning her neck, the High Street itself, with its ceaseless stream of trams and omnibuses” (488). Though the emphasis is still on looking, this woman looks out at the city, while being trapped inside. Though she realizes the power she could have as a *flâneuse*, she is constrained by the tantalizingly transparent and yet material barrier of the window.

In the course of the story, the young woman’s father learns that he has become rich, and then denies the money, because it has been “wrung from the starving poor” through “cruelty and extortion” (488-89), closing the door on the opportunity of social advancement and possibly, physical freedom for his daughter. For Eleanor, Eldorado is the possibility of having the economic means to escape her confining, bourgeois home, once more symbolized by an omnibus.

Significantly, the freedom that Eleanor sees is not only constituted of the sights of the streets outside, but also the sights of the poor women who work in its environs, whom Eleanor envies. Continuing to describe Eleanor's view, the narrator says "there was a public house at the corner" within which Eleanor caught "a glimpse of the lively barmaid" and on the street, "a group of flower-girls...jesting with the 'busmen and passers-by'" (488). From the fact that Eleanor is gazing at these women, readers infer that she envies them. However, Levy also tells readers this, saying that she "used, sometimes, to envy" their "social opportunity" (488). Levy once again romanticizes the image of female poverty, contrasting it sharply with the father's imagined image of the "starving poor," which Levy seems to be discrediting.

This story can be seen as similar to *Reuben Sachs*, in that Levy does decidedly politicize the suffering of middle-class women in this story. The reader is asked to sympathize with Eleanor at the expense of the "starving poor". Levy once said that she pitied the small bourgeois shut up in flats at Islington, more than those "merry girls who have short lives," the working class girls, whom her friends, Clementina Black and the Radfords aimed to help. This quote suggests that Levy is engaging in the same middle-class feminism that she uses in *Reuben Sachs*.

In this story, Levy does not use the same techniques of evading politicization. Rather, she overtly politicizes Eleanor's plight. If Eleanor's father had taken the money, and improved her life, her father would have seen this as an action that indirectly impoverished the "starving poor." Thus, Levy suggests that Eleanor's father believes her ennui and the family's poverty at least accomplishes some purpose—that of helping working class people. However, Levy depicts the father's action of turning down the

money as merely pathetic, not tragic. It does not accomplish any purpose, but is rather depicted as pointless. Thus, Levy disavows the importance of the political movement for the sake of which Eleanor remains confined, thus privileging the concerns of the middle-class woman, making this story mirror, in some ways, her feminist politics in *Reuben Sachs*.

IV. TO “BEAT THEMSELVES AGAINST THE ANCIENT FORTIFICATIONS” OR TO “SCALE THE WALLS AND DEPART?”: THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN *REUBEN SACHS*

Levy depicts the middle-class Jewish women in her novel *Reuben Sachs* as being confined physically to their homes and the homes of relatives, and foregrounds this confinement by omitting any discussion of their physical experiences of transportation, or of their experiences of London. Levy’s women are also confined in a larger sense to performing the actions that their families and custom dictate. In *Reuben Sachs*, women do not have a choice in where they or their lives will go. Levy depicts women in *Reuben Sachs* as without agency, vacillating between obedience to a culture that according to Levy, praises materialism, and between taking the actions they wish to take in the real world. Thus, throughout the last portion of the novel, Levy’s central female character, Judith is confined to living in her mind, in between implementing either version of reality in the physical world.

In “Women and Club Life” and “Readers at the British Museum,” Levy constructs women as taking advantage of public spaces of London, which Levy represents as democratic, available to all. In “Eldorado at Islington” and “The Ballade of an Omnibus,” Levy uses the image of working-class women as a symbol for physical freedom, as contrasted with the confined woman of the middle-class. The women in Levy’s *Reuben Sachs* have no such idealized models of freedom, however. It is a rare

occurrence in *Reuben Sachs* to even read of a female character in the act of going from one place to another, even if both places are private homes, rather than public spaces. The emphasis on depicting characters, especially female characters in the act of using transportation, is notably absent in *Reuben Sachs*. The novel takes place in the 1880s, as evidenced by the dawning of the Jewish year 564 in the novel. If one were to attempt to discern the book's temporal setting merely by examining its female characters, however, it could just as well be a novel from fifty years earlier. The female characters do not take part in the opportunities provided by the spaces Levy discusses in her other works—places such as the Reading Room of the British Museum or female clubs. Neither does transportation aid them in making choices about where they will go. Readers truly only see the city and the modernity symbolized by transportation through the eyes of Reuben. Thus, the novel is about Reuben, only in that it is about what the female protagonist cannot have—a life that is physically mobile and unconfined. Levy thus depicts the way in which Jewish culture makes it particularly difficult for Judith, who is representative of middle-class Jewish women to develop intellectually or emotionally, apart from the influence of Reuben, representative of middle-class Jewish men.

Levy's work should also be examined in a context of her membership in and engagement with middle-class Anglo-Jewish culture, as this is an important consideration in analyzing her feminism in *Reuben Sachs*. Levy was born in 1863 to Jewish parents, Lewis and Isabelle Levy, both of whose parents had come to England in the eighteenth century (Beckman 12), placing them solidly in the realm of assimilated Jews, as opposed to Jews who had immigrated more recently. Their degree of assimilation to English culture contributed to the fact that though they had many Jewish friends and

acquaintances, the Levys also had many gentile friends and acquaintances (Beckman 14). It is not known whether the Levy siblings had any exposure to their religion through regular synagogue attendance, or cultural training such as training in the Hebrew language—factors that would indicate the degree to which their family was immersed in Jewish practice (14). Therefore, Levy’s relationship to her culture in the abstract is difficult to discern, except through her writings about it. However, Levy’s attitude toward her family and Jewish friends seems to have been extremely affectionate even after the publishing of *Reuben Sachs*. Beckman says that Levy has many outings with her sisters, Katie and Ella, and Katie’s children written on her calendar in 1889, the year she died (Beckman 177).

It is perhaps just as difficult to assess Levy’s feelings about Anglo-Jewish culture, and about her membership in that culture from her writings. Scholars know that Levy was an agnostic, and so did not engage in the religious discourse or practices of Judaism as an adult (Beckman 113). However, her attitude toward Judaism as a culture is more difficult to ascertain. Beckman discusses several of Levy’s unpublished writings and sketches about Jewish culture, some of which strike one as exemplifying the type of the “self-hating Jew.” One of these is a sketch of Jewish women that paints them in remarkably stereotypical fashion (Beckman 188). However, Beckman also suggests that Levy had a cultural awakening on first visit to Florence in 1886, during which she found a new interest in and affection for her culture. Levy wrote several essays for the *Jewish Chronicle* prior to the debacle with *Reuben Sachs*, including “The Ghetto at Florence,” “Middle-Class Jewish Women of Today,” “Jewish Children,” “Jewish Humor,” all in 1888. All these essays bespeak sympathy with her culture. As with many of her other

essays, her essays about Judaism, (except “Middle-Class Jewish Women”) and as in many of her other essay, an interest in depicting what she saw as interesting or problematic, without too overtly politicizing her discourse.

Reuben Sachs, however, has been more hotly debated both in Levy’s time and in our own. Many characterizations of Jews in *Reuben Sachs* did and still do appear quite stereotypical. Levy reminds her readers over and over that her characters are Jewish, calling them “ill-made sons of Shem,” and other such stereotypes (Levy 251). Levy’s text also reinforces contemporary stereotypes about Jews as materialistic, particularly in the title character, Reuben’s, choice not to marry Judith, whom he loves. Many scholars such as Susan David Bernstein and Linda Hunt Beckman have suggested that Levy’s primary aim in writing this novel was to express a feminist message to the larger English culture, even if that goal came at the expense of writing truthful characterizations of Jewish people. One reviewer expressed this hypothesis in Levy’s time, saying that “she [Levy] must have known that there are Episcopalians and Dissenters in England who would have acted exactly as Sachs did, and with as little, or less, compunction” (“Literary: Amy Levy’s *Reuben Sachs*” 142).

However, Levy’s characters are also remarkably complex and very human—another fact which was recognized by contemporary reviews as well. Though Reuben is materialistic and ambitious, he also has an affection for Jewish culture, which is portrayed sympathetically. In addition, he has always been kind to Judith, giving her books and guiding her intellectual life, when no one else will. This is typical of Levy’s characterizations in *Sachs*, none of which are completely one-sided.

However, much of the contemporary Anglo-Jewish tendency to pillory Levy comes from the fact that the 1880s were a notoriously difficult time to be a Jew in London. Levy wrote *Reuben Sachs* in a time when anti-Semitism was quickly mounting, a fact that made receptions of her indictment of Anglo-Jewish materialism in *Reuben Sachs*, particularly harsh. Levy published her novel in a climate that was far from favorable to Anglo-Jewish culture, a fact that partially explains some of the scathing reviews Levy received.

Reuben Sachs was published in January of 1889. This was an extremely difficult time for Anglo-Jewry, first in terms of the immigration of Eastern European Jews. Susan David Bernstein states that “in the 1880s, the Jewish population in England doubled when poor Jewish immigrants, fleeing persecution in Russia and Poland, flooded East London” (Introduction. *Reuben Sachs* 22), from approximately 150,000 to 200,000 immigrants (Endelman 127). This immigration increased anti-Semitism, further alienating the Jewish minority from the rest of English society. Indeed, Endelman asserts that anti-Semitism was not necessarily related to the number of Jews who had immigrated, but to their concentration in areas of East London, swelling already established fears of the East End’s poor, which “threatened Victorian civilization (156). Thus, these fears were spatially based. The high concentration of Jews in the East End led people in the larger English population to identify all English Jews with these immigrant Jews, transcribing their fear of immigrant Jews onto native Jews in the process.

The unsolved “Jack the Ripper” murders of six prostitutes from the summer through the fall of 1888, which took place mainly in the East End districts of Whitechapel and Spitalfields, also contributed greatly to the anti-Semitism to the climate of anti-

Semitism in which *Reuben Sachs* was published. Many English citizens believed the murders were committed by a Jewish man, whom they called “Leather Apron,” and whose face, said the *Pall Mall Gazette* was of a marked Hebrew type” (qtd. Walkowitz 203). As the murders had been going on since the summer, it is likely the spirit of terror that had pervaded the city, particularly the East End, was still going strong. This also could have contributed significantly to the sensitivity to attack felt by Jewish men at this time.

Many Jewish male critics in particular seemed threatened by Levy’s emphasis on materialism as it affected middle-class Jewish women, taking her depiction of events as she saw them for her agreement with them. The fact that the feminist paper, *The Woman’s Herald* lauded the book in glowing terms, illustrates this point. The reviewer compares her to “the author of *African Farm*,” Olive Schreiner, who had a high literary reputation, and to George Eliot, whose success and reputation were incomparable. The reviewer then predicts for her “fame and a name” (“Reuben Sachs” 3). This reviewer also says that Levy’s book “is not a book with a purpose, but if had a purpose, it would be one unfavorable to male Jews” (“Reuben Sachs” 3). The reviewer wants to dissociate Levy’s book from the stigma of the political, but at the same time, recognizes that the book’s “purpose” is not merely to pillory Jewish culture in general, but more particularly, to ameliorate a problem she saw as caused by the attitudes of Jewish men toward Jewish women. Certainly, there were also other reviewers who praised *Reuben Sachs*. The reviewer of *The Spectator* said of the novel that “the characters are painted with a force that makes up for the complete absence of plot” (“Reuben Sachs” qtd. Bernstein 161).

Though this could also be interpreted as a back-handed insult, it is not as he says that this is part of the book's particular "merit" (161).

Many reviewers, however, focused less on the quality of the novel than on its depictions of Jewish culture—particularly in its depictions of Jews as materialistic. Many reviewers seemed to think that Levy was attempting to convey the idea that all Jews are materialistic merely because several characters in the novel have this fault. Though the above quoted reviewer of *The Spectator* noticed that there are "three characters who heartily loathe this materialism," many reviewers act as though Levy were condemning all Jews for this flaw. The reviewer for the *Academy* says that "Miss Levy gives the impression of having laid bare the faults of her people with a rather merciless hand" ("New Novels" qtd. Bernstein 164). *The Academy* reviewer does, however, recognize that "the novel...appears to have a purpose quite distinct from the gratification of alien curiosity," seeing it as rather, a "moral or a warning" (164).

Many Jewish male reviewers in particular criticized *Reuben Sachs* harshly. Criticisms mainly attempt to discredit Levy in two ways—by asserting that Levy is not sufficiently Jewish enough to discuss these issues, by asserting that Levy's novel was written to gratify the curiosity of Gentiles hungry for sordid depictions of Jewish life. The *Jewish Chronicle*, which up until that point, had given good reviews to everything Levy had written, refused to review her book, merely printing an article entitled "Critical Jews" that took to task "Jewish litterateurs," who "finding a ready interest in descriptions of Jewish life among the general novel-reading public, have gone to the pains of renewing their acquaintance with Jewish society for a few weeks in order to obtain local color" ("Critical Jews" qtd. Bernstein 159). Linda Hunt Beckman suggests that this reviewer

was probably lumping Levy in with other novelists writing around this time, such as Julia Frankau, who wrote *Dr. Phillips* (Beckman 180).

The fact that Levy was lumped in with these authors illustrates the sensitivity of the Jewish community to attack at this time. Linda Hunt Beckman discusses Frankau's book in particular as "unmodulated in its sordid portrayal of Anglo-Jewry" (Beckman 180). The fact that Levy's novel is grouped with Frankau's underlines the fact that Levy's novel was also viewed as both sordid and pandering to Gentile ideas of Jews, that were based on the immigration of Eastern European Jews.

These two reviewers also attack Levy's claim to Jewishness, attempting to discredit the veracity of *Reuben Sachs*, but also attempt to discredit her on the basis of her sex. The reviewer for the *Jewish World* says that Levy's "ridiculous slips in Jewish allusion" reveal that "in the particular direction in which it was required, these ladies received no education whatever" ("Deterioration" 166). This review recalls what Pykett says about the shallow criticism aimed at small, technical mistakes made by female authors. The *Jewish Chronicle* also couched Levy's novel in these terms, saying that "the effects of such performances by Israelites is the more deleterious, as it is impossible for the general novel-reading public to know on what superficial knowledge of Jewish society such sketches are based" (161). Once again, critics couch Levy's novel as ill-informed, a criticism typical of female writers at the time, and one that is enhanced by the fact that Levy is depicting such a maligned group of people.

The reviewer for the *Jewish World* also focuses directly on Levy's qualities as a non-normative woman, attempting to discredit her in this way. This article, called "The Deterioration of the Jewess" illustrates in particular the gender-based character of the

criticisms of Levy's novel. This reviewer once again lumps Levy in with Frankau, saying that these novels "are not so much books as they are symptoms of moral disease" ("Deterioration" qtd. Bernstein 165). However, the author credits Frankau for her "credible blushes" indicated by her assumption of a Gentile pseudonym, as opposed to Levy, who wrote the novel under her own name. The article goes on to attribute Levy's novel to the "neglected state of specifically Jewish female education among the middle classes in our community" (166). The reviewer contrasts Levy with "the Jewish woman as she was known to our fathers, with her strong racial sympathies, her unaffected piety, her devotion to her children, her delight in a purely Jewish home, and the modest virtues of her thorough womanliness" (166). This review illustrates that it is not only as a member of Jewish culture that reviewers objected to Levy's review, but also as an example of the perceived degeneration of Jewish womanhood.

Native Jews were often unsettled by the presence of Eastern European Jews, whose religious customs, manners, and dress were dramatically different from theirs (Endelman 127). Todd Endelman states that these immigrant Jews "rubbed against the comfortable grain of native Jewish patterns, creating intracommunal friction (127). Endelman also writes that this influx caused native Jews to strive to "assure their fellow citizens of their basic Englishness" and encouraged native Jews to mute their distinctiveness" as a culture, not wishing to be identified with this alien group (165). Thus, Levy's novel not engages what was at the time, a difficult question for Anglo-Jewry, the question of whether it was better to assimilate completely to English culture, and thus avoid marginalization, or whether it was better to retain their autonomy as a culture. Levy's narrative also could have been seen as offensive to Anglo-Jewish people

in the sense that it suggested that in some ways, Jewish culture still needed to modernize its views, getting in step with the mainstream of English culture, namely in the area of its views toward women. Thus, Levy was seen not only as reinforcing harmful stereotypes about Jewish materialism from within the culture, but also for couching the need for greater freedom for women in terms of modernization and Anglicization, reinforcing stereotypes that the Jews' treatment of women was old-fashioned and "Eastern".

Levy's essay "Middle-Class Jewish Women of Today," published in the *Jewish Chronicle* in 1886, two years before *Reuben Sachs*, is particular reinforces this assumption. This essay is also interesting for illuminating Levy's depiction of Judith, a character in *Reuben Sachs* who is excessively sheltered by her family, in fashion similar to the confinement of Eleanor in *Eldorado at Islington*. It is significant that Levy entitles the essay "Middle-Class Jewish Women," signaling a turn in the direction of her feminism. She no longer glosses over class distinctions, as in her essays "Women and Club Life" and "Readers at the British Museum" or uses working-class women as symbols of freedom as in "The Ballade of an Omnibus" and "Eldorado at Islington". Rather, she establishes the fact that she will be discussing the problems of middle-class women, making this the prototype of the brand of feminism Levy employs in *Reuben Sachs*.

One factor that separates this essay from *Reuben Sachs* is its reception. This essay, unlike *Sachs*, was met with no significant backlash in the periodical press. Though Levy does employ a more overt feminism, she still uses some tactics to ease the force of her argument—for instance, the subtitle, "By a Jewess" which was probably meant to assure readers that as a woman writing from within Jewish culture, she has the authority to

discuss the topic of relations between Jewish men and women. Levy also directly states that she is not indicting Jewish culture alone, but the larger English culture of the 1880s as well. The setbacks faced by middle-class Jewish women as discussed by Levy were also experienced by women of all cultural backgrounds living in England. Levy acknowledges “that this latter evil is common to all commercial communities, cannot be denied; and the same may be said of some other evils which have been pointed out in the course of this paper” (526). Therefore, she is not singling out the Jewish culture as the only culture that does not respect its women. However, she still appeared to believe that materialism was a particular problem in her culture, and to want to ameliorate this problem.

Levy continues to affirm that the problems she discusses in this essay are particularly those of middle-class women. Levy establishes that relational problems between these two groups are specifically caused by the differences in aims of middle-class men and women. Levy says that while “so many of our men are engaged in money-making,” many middle-class Jewish women have attained a high level of culture “by reason of their extra leisure” (Levy qtd. New 526)—leisure which working-class women would not have enjoyed.

Levy first associates middle-class Jewish women with confinement by mentioning in the first paragraph of her essay that “the shadow of the harem has rested on our womankind” (525). She returns to the metaphor of the harem later in her essay, saying that middle-class Jewish women were “excluded, with almost Eastern jealousy, from every-day intercourse with men and youths of her own age” (525). Susan David Bernstein and other critics have argued that Levy is employing a tactic that Edward Said

has called “orientalism.” She is to a certain degree, appealing to Gentile ideas about Jews circulating in the culture at the time, to advance the interests of women. She once again associates changing views on women with the modern, however, by saying, “to-day we see it lifting,” but that this is only in “reluctant obedience to the force of circumstances, the complex conditions of our modern civilization.” (525). Levy’s argument has not changed—that middle-class Jewish women, like the women in her other works, are being aided by the changing technologies and ideas of modernity. However, this time, she does not describe women’s participation in these institutions as a tide that has already turned, but as one that must continue to progress, making her argument more direct, and therefore, threatening to the patriarchal establishment.

In addition to being physically confined, Levy argues that middle-class Jewish women, are confined by the exchange of women. She says they are looked upon as “solely designed for marrying or giving in marriage” (526). She says that this fact causes many Jewish men to take “extreme caution” in approaching Jewish women as friends, further circumscribing their circle of acquaintance (526). Indeed, she says that “a mutual attitude of self-consciousness, bred of the deplorable state of things, is almost inevitable between Jews and Jewesses.” (526).

Just as Levy expresses the contemporary state of middle-class Jewish women in terms of their physical positions, she also articulates the responses of the frustrated middle-class Jewish women of whom she speaks in spatial terms. Levy says that “the assertion of even comparative freedom on the part of a Jewess often means the severance of the closest ties, both of family and of race” (527). Levy is speaking likely of intellectual and personal freedoms, such as the choice of pursuing a vocation, rather than

marriage. However, she expresses that for the middle-class woman intellectual and personal freedom were tied up inextricably with physical freedoms. Levy states that one can see “an ever increasing minority of eager women beating themselves in vain against the solid masonry of our ancient fortification...sometimes succeeding in scaling the walls and departing, never to return, to the world beyond” (527). Levy constructs women’s responses to their confinement as a dilemma—either they will continue to frustrate themselves by struggling toward their personal goals within a system, depicted as a city, that will not yield, or they will leave the system, they will scale the walls of the city, Levy’s metaphor for Jewish culture. Levy makes it clear that this break would be both permanent and profound, making itself felt in the reality of women’s absence from Jewish culture—an argument that not surprisingly, Jewish men might have found threatening.

As in her essay, “Middle-Class Jewish Women,” Levy discusses the lot of a Jewish woman in the 1880s, in this case, Judith Quixano, as painfully constricted, in contrast to the increased mobility available to the mass of middle-class English women during the 1880s. Levy discusses the ways in which Judith’s circumstances constrain her directly after readers first glimpse her along with Reuben Sachs, upon his homecoming from Cambridge. Levy says that

for Judith Quixano, and for many women placed as she, it is difficult to conceive a training, an existence, more curiously limited, more completely provincial than hers. Her outlook on life was of the narrowest; of the world, of London, of society beyond her own set, it may be said that she

had seen nothing at first hand; had looked at it all, not with her own eyes, but with the eyes of Reuben Sachs (210).

In positioning Judith's mentally and physically constrained experience of reality within a context of the "many women placed as she," real middle-class Jewish women in English society, Levy suggests that Judith is typical of this group. By representing Judith as an all-too-familiar type of middle-class Jewish woman, Levy brings forward the position of middle-class Jewish women as subjects for her readers' concern in a far more overt way than she does in the other works examined here.

Indeed, Judith's economic position is extremely precarious. Though she is of good birth, a Quixano, whom Levy identifies as the "vielle noblesse" of Judaism, she has lived with her cousins the Leunigers from the age of fifteen, in order not to be a burden on her own economically-strained family (208). Thus, readers understand that Judith does not have the monetary resources to marry well. However, in living with the Leunigers, Judith is placed well within the middle-class as Levy discusses it in "Middle-Class Jewish Women," as a stratum of society which constrains its women physically and emotionally through excessive attention to custom.

Levy continues to affirm that Judith is not engaged with the city throughout the novel, by very seldom depicting her protagonist outside the home. Rather, as Richa Dwor has observed, "much of the story takes place in drawing-rooms" (462). This is certainly true of Judith and the other women in the family. Judith is always depicted in the kind of domestic settings Rochelson mentions. All of the important scenes involving Judith and Reuben happen indoors. These include the first time readers see them together, the incident when Reuben visits her and his cousins, the Leunigers after returning from

Cambridge, and the trysts they have after the Day of Atonement dinner and at the ball given by the Leunigers.

Levy frames Judith's insularity by characterizing Reuben as a character who loves the city. Reuben uses the city to enrich his life both professionally and personally. Reuben receives letters at his club, Pall Mall, and works in Lincoln's Inn, Chancery Lane. From Levy's discussion of women's clubs in her essay "Women and Club Life," readers know that Levy saw clubs as an important tool for professional and personal enjoyment in the lives of London's women—a tool that was still not completely respectable for women to use. Reuben also has a good profession—that of a lawyer—and is professionally ambitious, aiming for the position of Conservative M.P.

When Reuben first returns home from Cambridge, Levy also establishes the fact that Reuben's experiences in the city enrich his life on a personal level as well, allowing him to live a life that is varied, and over which he has decided control. Levy's narrator says of Reuben, "He was back again; back to the old, fully, strenuous life which was so dear to him; to the din and rush and struggle of the London which he loved with a passion that had something of poetry in it" (Levy qtd. New 200). Levy also states that this existence "owed some of its piquancy to the fact that it was led partly in the democratic atmosphere of modern London, partly in the conservative precincts of the Jewish community" (200). Reuben's life is enriched by the variety it has—a variety that is connected to his status as a man.

The public space of London also helps Reuben to know himself better, to come to important discoveries about himself, and to make choices about his life. In this way, Levy's depiction of Reuben in the town also resembles that of a *flâneur*, in whose

privileged strolling is implicit the agency to make decisions about where he goes and in a more extended sense, where his life will go. When one recalls that in her essay, “Women and Club Life,” Levy argues that the *flâneuse* does not exist, the politicization she intends through the depiction of Reuben’s strolling becomes clear. A woman could not experience the same degree of physical freedom, according to Levy.

While walking around London after the family’s dinner on the Day of Atonement, Reuben discovers that he is in love with Judith, but also decides that that love is not as important to him as his ambition. Levy says that “as he went slowly down Regent Street, the thought of Judith took more and more possession of him, till his pulses beat and his senses swam” (241). He then goes into a reverie, beginning to imagine “children on his hearth with Judith’s eyes, and Judith there herself amongst them” (241). As he walks, however, he continues thinking, and eventually realizes that “ten years hence...the fever would certainly have abated...but his ambition would be as lusty as ever” (242). The end of his contemplation corresponds with the end of his walk, as he arrives home, “tired and haggard” (242). Levy suggests that Reuben’s walk around the city gives him the permission to explore the forbidden places of his own psyche as well, making him tired both physically and mentally, and allowing him agency in his own life.

Judith’s experience of the city is in sharp contrast to Reuben’s. Judith experiences little of the city, a fact that translates into Judith having little emotional and intellectual freedom as well. The other women in the novel also have few freedoms of any kind. Therefore, my analysis could be applied to any of the female characters in Levy’s novel. I focus on Judith however, because throughout the novel Levy marks Judith as a different kind of woman. She suggests that Judith could do more than wait for matrimony, were

she given the chance. Levy says that Judith possesses many good qualities, including “beauty...intelligence...power of feeling” (209). Levy also says later, when Judith is perusing a stack of books given to her by Reuben that he had given them to her because he had discovered her “power of following out a train of thought in her clear, careful way, and had taken pleasure in providing her with historical essays and political lives, and even in leading her through the mazes of modern politics” (267). In this statement, Levy affirms once again not only Judith’s normatively feminine qualities, but also, her intelligence.

Though Levy does depict Judith out of the home a select number of times,--to go to the synagogue, to go to Whiteley’s, a department store, to go to a ball, and to visit her mother in the Walterton Road, Judith has no agency in making the choice to visit these places. Furthermore, Judith is chaperoned on all of these excursions except for that of going to visit her mother. Going to the ball is a family affair, and therefore not something Judith actively chooses to do, but an event that it is already understood she will attend. When Judith is contemplating the proposal of marriage she has received from Bertie Lee-Harrison, her mother takes her to her home in the Walterton Road, without asking if she wants to go. The only activity outside the home that Judith uses agency in deciding to do is her trip to her mother’s house to give her a birthday present. Even this event is delayed because Rose claimed her for purposes of shopping” (221). The narrator characterizes Judith’s attitude toward the trip as “ready and willing enough” (222). These quotations underscore the fact that Judith does not choose the places she goes; rather her family feels they have the right to her company.

Judith is depicted in transit only a few times, and her agency in choosing to move from place to place is also low. Levy writes that on the way back from the ball, Judith is “lying back pale and tired in the corner of the carriage” (241). The only journey Judith chooses to go on, and that she undertakes as an individual, is that to the Walterton Road to visit her mother—a journey for which she uses an omnibus, a mode of transportation about which Levy wrote frequently.

However, the act of taking transportation is not emphasized as it is for Levy’s speaker in the “Ballade of an Omnibus.” The narrator says that after the trip to Whiteley’s, “they parted, Rose going towards home, Judith committing herself to a large blue omnibus” (22). Rather than depicting Judith’s decision to ride the omnibus as a way of taking responsibility for getting to her mother’s house, Levy depicts Judith as “committing” herself to the authority and supervision of the omnibus, which will she trusts, get her where she needs to go. A few paragraphs later, Levy states that Judith stops the bus. In between Judith’s getting on the omnibus and getting off, however, Levy describes the appearance of the Walterton Road. Considering the fact that Judith is riding on the omnibus, we might expect to see these observations focalized through her, or given from her perspective. Levy rather chooses to narrate the appearance of the Walterton Road using the point of view of the third person omniscient narrator. This gives readers the knowledge of the demographics and appearance of the street, but evades discussing what Judith might be seeing. By not providing readers with Judith’s perspective on the scenery and instead giving her own, Levy constructs Judith not as a *flâneuse*, who possesses the city by seeing, but as a woman whose point of view, whose perspective is extremely undervalued in her culture.

Levy depicts Judith as a woman who does not actively decide upon the spaces in which she will live her life. Levy uses this construction to imply that Judith has an extremely low self-worth. In fact, Levy says that Judith saw herself “merely as one of a vast crowd of girls awaiting their promotion by marriage” (209). Judith sees herself as a “girl,” not a full-grown woman, awaiting her promotion (perhaps to womanhood) by marriage. When Bertie Lee-Harrison begins to single Judith out for his attentions, Judith thinks that “his very readiness to fall down before her, seemed to her—alas, poor Judith!—in itself a brand of inferiority” (272). Judith does not value Bertie’s as a potential husband in part because he values her. This once again suggests that Judith has a very low sense of self-worth.

Levy asserts that Judith’s intellectual life is markedly narrow. When Judith has insomnia because of hers and Reuben’s abortive love affair, Judith looks for a book because she remembers that Reuben and Esther find books helpful when they suffer from insomnia. That the very suggestion that Judith pursues came from the mind of Reuben suggests that Judith is emotionally stunted, that she does not know how to help herself overcome sadness, as other characters in the novel do. Levy’s narrator begins the scene *in media res*, or in the middle of the action, by enumerating titles on Judith’s shelf, without giving any context for what these titles mean. This increases the reader’s sense that Judith is reduced to these titles; she is reduced to the intellectual sustenance that Reuben has given her. The narrator then states that “these were among her favorites, and they had all been given to her by Reuben Sachs,” (266) once again asserting the fact that Judith has not chosen these books, representative of the fact that she has not chosen her intellectual interests.

Levy continues to assert the influence Reuben has had on Judith, observing that “perhaps he did not realize, what it is always hard for the happy, objective male creature to realize, that if he had happened to be a doctor, Judith might have developed scientific tastes, or if a clergyman, have found nothing so interesting as theological discussion and the history of the Church” (267). Levy does assert that the difference between them is due to the difference in their genders, as she is female, and he is a “happy, objective male creature”. Unlike in her other late works, in *Reuben Sachs*, Levy makes no attempt to claim London for Judith by optimistically asserting that she is free to move around it; rather she admits that Judith is confined, and that it is because of her status as a Jewish woman.

After Reuben and Judith part at the ball, Levy uses several experimental techniques to illustrate the way in which Judith’s physical stasis merges radically with her intellectual and emotional paralysis. One of these techniques is the use of several extended, ambiguous dream sequences in which Judith takes little physical action, but mainly dwells obsessively on the fact that the love between she and Reuben is over. Though the novel has an omniscient third person narrator, these passages are focalized through Judith, giving the illusion that nothing else is going on physically, that the world of the novel has come to a stop, simulating the fact that loss of Reuben paralyzes Judith, that her already low degree of physical and emotional freedom is the casualty of this love affair, and of her lack of agency in it as a woman.

One of the primary ways Judith struggles with stasis and mobility after this event is through the blurring of the line between the real and the imaginary. In these sequences, it is as if Judith is constantly immobilized by sleep, watching her own life taking place,

rather than taking an active part in it. This sense of dreaming begins when Judith is still at the ball, a fact that locates the ball as the source of Judith's troubles. Before Judith begins to have a sense of dreaming, the weather of London prefigures this event by exhibiting "a yellow haze which any but a Londoner would have called a fog" (258). In the context of this literal fog, the lovers then enter a moral fog. As Reuben begins to commit his "theft," taking the chrysanthemums that Judith has in the bosom of her dress, the narrator, focalizing her descriptions through Judith says that "It was like a dream to her, a wonderful dream, with which the whirling maze of dancers, the heavy scents, the delicious music were inextricably mingled. And mingling with it also was a strange, harsh sound in the street outside, which, faint and muffled at first, was growing every moment louder and more distinct" (258). The harsh sound is that of the newspaper boy announcing the death of the conservative member of Parliament, whose place he will take. This incident is of profound importance as it is the fulfillment of Reuben's insatiable ambition, and the event which once and for all, precludes the possibility of Reuben's marrying Judith, a woman with no fortune, but who is condemned to pursue a respectable fate--marriage.

Judith has neither control of the "theft" Reuben commits, or the horrible sound which means he is going to leave her. Judith hears the news shouted through an open window, but does not see anything—an event reminding one of Levy's use of the window as a transparent barrier, allowing in this instance, not even a view of the city, but merely the sounds coming from the street. Levy identifies Judith's inability to access or control the world outside the window with this inability with this inability to effect the

larger events of her life, particularly, the inability to change her economic status, or to change Reuben's choice.

During these chapters, Levy devotes relatively large amounts of narrative space to very little action, as Judith is frequently in a dream state, attempting to discern what status the events of the ball should take in her life. The combination of these tendencies, sleeping in the day, and staying up at night, cause Judith to live in a liminal realm between waking and sleeping for three chapters, not able to take any physical action. Thus, Levy not only toys with the passing of time and space for Judith, but also for her readers, conveying to readers the sense of impotence that Judith feels, as a woman dependent on the decisions of Reuben.

Levy once again connects Judith's lack of agency in the large events of her life with her physical stasis. When Judith arrives home from the ball she thinks that "Nothing had happened—nothing; yet henceforward life would wear a different face for her and she knew it" (261). Levy's narrator repeats this assertion again in the next chapter, saying "Nothing had happened—nothing" (262). Indeed, nothing has physically happened; no words were spoken to the effect that the relationship is over. Judith is frustrated by the lack of evidence in the real world of the event that has happened between her and Reuben. She attempts to make some kind of physical movement to relieve this frustration, to somehow restore her agency in the events of the physical world, as they affect her own life. Levy says that "again Judith dropped her hands to her sides, she clenched them in an intolerable agony; she took a few steps and flung herself face forwards on the pillow" (263). Because Judith is a middle-class woman, she does not have the agency to realize

her goals in the physical world. She is bound by her position as a woman, and by her economic position to confine her own goals to the realm of her mind.

Finally, Levy returns to the device of the window in the final scene to once again identify Judith's lack of agency in the city of London and lack of mobility with her lack of agency in the rest of her life. Following her learning of Reuben's death, at the home of her new husband, Bertie Lee-Harrison, the convert to Judaism, Judith once again looks out a window at "London, his London," which "was full of life and sound, a living, solid reality; not—oh, wonder!—a dream city that melted and faded in the sunset" (292). This scene mirrors that of the death of Reuben's predecessor, in that Judith once again looks out a window. Though Judith affirms that it is not a dream, she does revert to a dream state in recalling the incident at the ball, beginning to hear "the dreamy monotony of a waltz;" and smell "the scent of dying flowers—tuberose, gardenia..." and imagines that "it was a November night, not springtime sunset, and the harsh sound struck upwards through the mist: 'Death of a Conservative M.P.! Death of the member for St. Baldwin's!'" (292). Though Judith imagines the autumn setting and the flowers, the words are being repeated in reality, only this time, to signify the death of Reuben, rather than his predecessor. Just as Judith is not a part of the city at which she looks, she is also not a part of her own life, but has no agency in the portions of her life that affect her the most, such as Reuben's death, or her marriage to another man.

Indeed, as Judith has no wealth of her own, she must marry outside the faith, wedding Bertie Lee-Harrison, the convert to Judaism. This is in part because Judith is given no agency in choosing her own mate, but is relegated to the margins by Reuben's materialistic choice to put his ambition first. Once again, Levy identifies materialism as a

force that could alienate Jewish women, and cause them to have to leave. Levy also affirms that Jewish culture is weakened by women who, frustrated at their physical confinement physically dissociate themselves from the Jewish culture, women who, as expressed in Levy's essay, "Middle-Class Jewish Women, "scale the walls and depart".

Judith's marriage to Bertie Lee-Harrison is couched in the language of escape, mirroring Levy's use of language in "Middle-Class Jewish Women." Rather than choosing the option to "pine and fade under her misery," Judith decides that "not thus could she hope for escape," but by taking "a new field of action" (280).

Though Levy says that the community "decided to accept Bertie's veneer of Judaism as the real thing," their marriage still separates Judith from her people. It immediately opens up to her a new degree of social mobility. Immediately after the engagement, Judith begins to name the houses at which she will be dining—Norwood Towers, for instance, where Adelaide, Reuben's sister ardently wishes to be allowed to go (281). Judith moves from Kensington Palace Gardens to Albert Hall Mansions, Bertie's home, which is not far away. However, she thinks that "she was in a fair way to drift off completely from her own people" (289). Judith is not far away physically from her family in this location. She even looks at the Gardens from her window in her flat. However, once again, Judith's confinement is expressed by a window. Though she is not far away from the outside, or from the people she loves, her Jewish family, she cannot truly reach either.

V. CONCLUSION - FROM “FROM PALLID LITTLE AMY LEVY” TO “A GIRL OF GENIUS”: THE LEGACIES OF AMY LEVY

Amy Levy took her life by shutting herself in a room of her home with charcoal burning in the fire, on September 9 of 1889 (Beckman 200). After her death, Levy’s image exploded into a multiplicity of meanings, as friends, relatives, and contemporary literary critics, attempted to understand the death of this critically acclaimed, yet controversial author. Some memorialized her work in glowing terms. These included Oscar Wilde, who said of *Reuben Sachs* that it was a work “probably no other writer could have produced” (52), while Oscar Wilde called Levy a “girl of genius” (Moulton qtd. Pullen 7). Some critics such as Grant Allen, attempted to spin a moral for advanced women out of Levy’s death. In his article, “The Girl of the Future,” Allen uses Levy’s image to argue for the dangers of education to women’s health, asking sardonically “What are a few pallid little Amy Levys sacrificed along the way in the face of our fashionable Juggernaut?” and asserts that “Newnham has killed its thousands, Girton its tens of thousands!” (Allen qtd. Bernstein 241). Others suggested that Levy had killed herself because of the marginalization she suffered from one or more of the vectors of her difference—including Jewishness, sexual orientation, and mere fact of being a woman in the 1880s.

Studying Levy is important not only because her image was powerfully conflicted in her own time, but because critics today still reproduce the conflicting

images that surrounded the woman herself in the immediate aftermath of her death. Todd Endelman construed Amy Levy as “so depressed and self-hating, which in her case was linked to both her Jewishness and her sexuality, that she killed herself soon after her novel *Reuben Sachs* appeared” in 2002 (Endelman 170). Evidently, Levy is still controversial. I believe this is in part because Levy’s politics still resist easy definition. She was, stylistically, an aesthete, but held strong political views. She was a Jew, who had strong indictments of Anglo-Jewish culture, but also a woman who loved her own Jewish family dearly. She argued persuasively that middle-class women were confined by their culture, but at the same time, seemed to believe that working-class women were free, though the work of many of her socialist friends illustrated the untruth of this assumption.

Simply reproducing the harsh critiques of Levy’s contemporaries, however, does not bring we as scholars any closer to understanding why she held the beliefs she did. Rather, the act of reproducing these critiques serves to marginalize Levy, re-silencing the voice of a diverse author whose voice makes our picture of politics in the 1880s more complete. As a woman who was located at the conjunction of so many vectors of difference, Levy’s is a valuable voice not in spite of her complex political views, but because of them.

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ⁱ See "Neither Pairs, Nor Odd: Female Community in Late Nineteenth-Century London" by Deborah Epstein Nord, *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity* by Ana Parejo Vadillo, and "The Hour of Pink Twilight: Lesbian Poetics and Queer Encounters on the *Fin-de-Siècle* Street" by Kate Flint.