Nadia Valman. *The Jewess in Nineteenth-Century British Literary Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007

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1 Nadia Valman's book is a well-researched and cogently argued study of the image of the Jewess in nineteenth-century British literary culture. If, as the blurb on the dust jacket puts it, the author desires to challenge "the emphasis in previous scholarship on antisemitic stereotypes in this period," she impressively succeeds, as she shows how Jewish femininity could be the locus of a wide range of discursive negotiations. Through five extensive case studies, Valman demonstrates that the Jewess was simultaneously cast as an object of idealisation and an object of interventionist strategies which aimed at her conversion or "civil improvement." Whether these strategies were evangelical or emancipatory, conservative or radical in nature, the issue of gender was always a complicating factor: it confused the other "categories of difference" of the discursive formation at stake, and often revealed their instability and contradictions.

2 Valman's departure from previous scholarship is captured by her focus on what, following Bryan Cheyette, she calls "semitic" (rather than anti- or philosemitic) discourse. Concentrating on "ambivalent [forms] of representation in which the meaning of 'the Jew' is not fixed," and in which the Jewess appears as "an empty signifier onto which fantasies of desire or vengeance are arbitrarily projected," she advances the argument that the figure of the Jewess "marked out the axes of difference" through which English identity as a liberal and Protestant nation could be imagined (2-4). An imposingly wide array of texts from the 1820s to the early 1900s is drawn upon to substantiate this claim. While most of these texts are fictional, they range from the sentimental to the science-orientated, from the popular to the "highbrow," and they stem from as many different cultural contexts, both Anglo-Jewish and gentile. To trace the slippery role of the figure of the Jewess through these various contexts is no small task, but the author always seems to have command of her material, showing a particularly strong hand when she pin-points interactions between competing models of Jewish femininity.

3 That Valman knows how to organise and synthesise her material appears from the introduction. In it she clarifies how the nineteenth-century image of the Jewess developed within two "formative narrative paradigms," both of which fostered deeply ambivalent attitudes towards Judaism. On the one hand, enlightened and Hegelian narratives construed Jews as incapable of aligning with modernity because of their rigid, unreflexive adherence to

a fixed legal code. Even or especially when Jews became privileged objects of an emancipatory logic, Jewish particularism was seen as a threat to Britain's modern liberal culture and a disqualifier for emancipatory rights. Evangelical narratives, on the other hand, cast the Jew as an indispensable partner within history's providential design. Continuing seventeenth-century millennial beliefs and a concomitant conviction of Anglo-Jewish exceptionalism, evangelical authors took very literally the idea that the Second Coming was conditional on the conversion of the Jews, and they directed many christianising efforts to their association with Jewish women. After the evangelical revival of the first half of the century, metaphors of conversion would long continue to resurface in secular liberal discourse.

4 It is within these two "narrative paradigms" that Valman situates her in-depth case studies, beginning with a reading of the figure of the "repellent beauty" in secular novels. The model for this figure is Walter Scott's Rebecca: the beautiful, suffering Jewess in *Ivanhoe* (1819) whose combination of enhanced spirituality and erotic appeal secured a special place for her in the nineteenth-century imagination of Jewishness. As is well-known, Rebecca is a problematic heroine in that she resists religious conversion and finally chooses exile, while formally Scott's novel celebrates tolerance, liberality, and inclusivism as universal principles of progress. Valman's analysis of Rebecca's literary afterlife in works by Augustin Daly and Anthony Trollope, among others, leads to the identification of a pattern in which "narratives ostensibly about prejudice against Jews" are time and again seen to "shift their focus to become narratives about Jewish prejudice" (50). Apparently, these narratives displace the responsibility for the limits and shortcomings of the nineteenth century's enlightened, liberal universalism onto the "other" whom it purports to include and respect.

5 It adds to the persuasive force of Valman's study that she finds structurally homologous contradictions and paradoxes in texts of a very different kind, including conversionist literature by evangelical middle-class women (e.g. Annie Webb, Elizabeth Rigby) and the revisions of conversionist plots by Anglo-Jewish authors that followed in the 1840s (e.g. Grace Aguilar, the Moss sisters). Ironically, in both contexts, Christian notions of tolerance and care for the other found embodiment in empowering strategies of representation, while at the same time producing highly conservative constructions of gender. In two further chapters, Valman takes her story beyond the politically crucial year of 1858, when Jews gained admittance to the House of Commons. One chapter deals with novels of the 1870s which located narratives of Jewish assimilation as well as particularism in the world of commerce and capital. As Valman shows, these representations (which include Eliot's *Daniel*

Deronda) gave expression to the concern with cosmopolitanism that is typical of this decade; cosmopolitanism was as often idealised as it was feared to erode national "character," and Jewish protagonists, inextricably diasporic, formed convenient vehicles onto which this ambivalence could be deflected. The last chapter deals with the controversial Anglo-Jewish writers Amy Levy and Julia Frankau who, informed by biological and racial theories, construed Jewishness as degenerative but the Jewess as a potential agent of regeneration and redemption. Again, this case allows Valman to prove her overall contention that Jews in nineteenth-century British literature were rarely entirely "othered"; rather, the representation of the Jewess is seen here as profoundly ambivalent indeed, the site of discursive struggles which continued to mutate as the century drew to a close.

6 All things considered, this monograph forms an engaging study of nineteenth-century constructions of the Jewess in British literature. While Valman's scholarship has clearly benefited from gender theory and discourse-analytical approaches, she manages to wear her theoretical erudition lightly, preferring historicisation to insistent theoretical framing, in line with the place of this book in the series of "Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature." Yet this study will not only interest period specialists. Its wider relevance resides in its analysis of gender definitions and models of femininity in relation to the constitutive discourses of a modern liberal culture: the discourses of tolerance, emancipation, progress, and a scientific modernity which define themselves through, but also meet their defining limits in, the encounter with their "relevant others."