

**English Origins, Jewish Discourse, and the Nineteenth-Century British Novel: Reflections on a Nested Nation**, by Heidi Kaufman; pp. xii + 243. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009, \$85.00.

The curiously ubiquitous presence of Jews, Judaism, and the Judaic in nineteenth-century British culture continues to fascinate scholars. In her recent contribution to this body of work, Heidi Kaufman eschews the usual suspects—*Oliver Twist* (1837-38), *Daniel Deronda* (1876), and *The Way We Live Now* (1875)—and looks to the corners of Victorian literary culture to uncover “Jewish discourse” buried in obscure tracts like Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna’s *Judah’s Lion* (1843) or forgotten moments in canonical novels such as *Jane Eyre* (1847) or *Middlemarch* (1871-72). Building on the groundbreaking work of Bryan Cheyette in *Constructions of ‘the Jew’ in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations, 1875-1945* (1993) and Michael Ragussis in *Figures of Conversion: “The Jewish Question” and English National Identity* (1995), Kaufman argues both that “nineteenth-century novels frequently turned to representations of the theological and historical filiation of Jewish and Christian traditions” and that “depictions of this filiation played a profound role in conceptualizing English identity in this period” (1). Thus, discourse about Jews was not simply hostile or denigratory but productive, enabling writers to imagine and sustain ideas about English identity by figuring “their own history and culture as emerging from or intertwined with a Jewish

past" (2). "The version of England that appeared in nineteenth-century novels was more than just a political, religious, or geographical construction; it was also . . . a racial nation with a Jewish past" (5).

The book ranges widely across the realist novel and various forms of popular genre literature from the early Victorian period to the Fin de Siècle. This historical and generic breadth enables Kaufman to make a persuasive case for the persistence of the links between the Hebrew Bible, Jewish history, and English national identity. In the first two chapters, Kaufman's strategic pairings of texts around particular historical moments or locations work especially well: she studies Maria Edgeworth's and Charles Dickens's use of the Gordon riots together with perceptions of Lord George Gordon's conversion to Judaism, and she links Benjamin Disraeli and the popular evangelical writer Tonna through their similar stories of the Englishman's journey to Palestine. Given this eclectic choice of key texts, however, more contextual discussion is sometimes warranted. Kaufman notes that *Judah's Lion* was frequently reprinted throughout the 1840s and the rest of the century, for example, but does not mention that Tonna's millennialist vision of the restoration of the Jews to the Promised Land and the project of Jewish conversion more generally were also widely mocked.

At the heart of this study is the argument that Jews were seen within two different paradigms in the nineteenth century: the first presented them as the Old Testament source for modern Christianity; the second regarded them as a racial other. While Protestant writers aimed to appropriate the former paradigm, they also sought to allay the threat to national identity entailed by the latter. It was this tension, Kaufman argues, that the novel tried to resolve. Novels, she contends, "were uniquely well suited to this task because of their emphasis on sequential history, character development, and the possibilities of imagining the nation"; through these techniques they "sought to rework or submerge inherent contradictions in their constructions of England as a racially homogenous and religiously distinct nation" (18). Kaufman's claim works for some texts better than others, and it also sometimes produces convoluted or overly schematic readings. Early Victorian evangelicals like Tonna, after all, were remarkably untroubled by thoughts of the Jews' racial difference: they wholeheartedly accepted Jewish proselytes and often put them at the helm of their conversion operations. In a different vein, it's difficult to see how a triumphalist romp like H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) was wracked by anxiety about Jewish racial pollution.

At its best, however, Kaufman's analysis is striking. Her insistence on the deep impact of scripture reading on the Victorian imagination produces a new perspective on *Jane Eyre*, reading Jane's rebellion not only through the discourses of childhood and slavery as previous studies have done, but through images associated with Jews. "Jane, Rochester, and Bertha are not Jewish," she writes, "yet the same discourses of impurity, infiltration, poisoning, darkness, wandering, and vampiric Jewishness play a powerful role in imagining their pre-Christian states as figuratively Jewish" (104). Charlotte Brontë's characters "are imagined as figurative Jews at the start of their progress who must develop into Christians in order to reach their homes or the Celestial City" (116). As Kaufman shows, the supercessionist principle that regarded the New Testament as the fulfilment of the Old, and Christianity as the fulfilment of Judaism, implicitly structures Brontë's bildungsroman. Yet the novel's double-voiced narration, which interweaves child and adult perspectives, means that rather than producing a

simple narrative of progress—conversion as an absolute break with the past—Brontë contains Jane's "Jewish" past within her Christian identity.

Earlier studies of Semitic discourse have tended to use the term "ambivalence" to describe the combination of intimacy and disavowal that has characterized the Protestant relationship to Judaism and resulted in the distinctive doubling of Jewish cultural representations. Kaufman's interpretive metaphors for this relationship—"entanglement" or "nesting"—essentially describe the same thing (25, 60). Yet there is much potential in her idea of Jews and Christians as involved in a discursive "entanglement," a fraught confusion rather than a hierarchy of power. This could have been developed further. In the chapter on *Middlemarch*, Kaufman includes a superbly complex image of George Eliot in Germany in the mid-1850s: Eliot wrote of admiring a performance of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Nathan der Weise* (1779) for its message of religious tolerance and universalism; in the same period she was reading Heinrich Heine, a Jewish convert to Christianity who used the language of Hebrew scripture to express his patriotic longing for Germany; and she was also translating the work of the Jewish heretic Baruch Spinoza. These different versions of the entanglement of religion, culture, and nation suggest the multiple, sometimes unexpected, ways that Jews could signify simultaneously for Victorian writers and readers—as religious origins and racial others but also as ideal nationalists.

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