

Amy Levy: Collected Writings, edited by Luke Devine. Library of the Jewish People, 2023

Lindsay Katzir

Volume 20, numéro 2, 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1117001ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/wij.v20i2.45042>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Women in Judaism, Inc.

ISSN

1209-9392 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Katzir, L. (2023). Compte rendu de [Amy Levy: Collected Writings, edited by Luke Devine. Library of the Jewish People, 2023]. *Women in Judaism*, 20(2), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.33137/wij.v20i2.45042>

Amy Levy: Collected Writings, edited by Luke Devine. Library of the Jewish People, 2023.

Reviewed by Lindsay Katzir, Antioch University New England, Keene, NH, USA

In 1888 the Victorian writer Amy Levy (1861–1889) published *Reuben Sachs*, a satirical portrayal of affluent London Jewry. Nearing the novel’s end, Judith Quixano reflects on her life after leaving the close-knit Jewish world of her youth to marry Bertie Lee-Harrison, an aristocratic convert to Judaism who remains an outsider to the community. Judith feels “an inrushing sense of exile,” as though “they and she were borne on dividing currents.” This moment reveals not only Judith’s longing for the world she has left behind but also the deep ambivalence that defined much of Levy’s own experience as an Anglo-Jewish writer. Torn between her Jewish identity and acculturated London life, Levy struggled to reconcile these conflicting worlds. She was at once insider and outsider—a chronicler of modern Jewish life yet also a critic of its social constraints. This tension is central to Levy’s work, which Luke Devine’s *Amy Levy: Collected Writings* (2023) foregrounds and occasionally amplifies.

Amy Levy was born to a middle-class, assimilated Jewish family in London. Though not particularly observant, her family provided her with a basic Jewish education and occasionally attended the West London Synagogue of British Jews, a reform congregation. She published her first poem at thirteen and later attended Brighton and Hove High School, where feminist teachings fostered her liberal attitudes and openness to unorthodox ideas. In 1879, Levy became the second Jewish woman to enroll at Cambridge University and the first to attend Newnham College, where she studied classical and modern languages and literature. However, her time at Cambridge was marked by pervasive antisemitism, which likely contributed to her decision to leave without completing her degree. Yet Cambridge shaped Levy’s literary development and coincided with the publication of her first poetry collection, *Xantippe and Other Verses* (1881).

After leaving Cambridge, Levy immersed herself in research, writing, and extensive travel, all while establishing her literary career. She frequented the British Museum Reading Room and joined London’s University Club for Ladies, where she formed friendships with leading feminists such as Olive Schreiner and Eleanor Marx. During this period, Levy’s poetry and essays often explored feminist themes and issues of exclusion, reflecting her complex relationship with her Jewishness. Her travels informed a series of articles for the *Jewish Chronicle*, where she both

critiqued and celebrated aspects of Jewish life, illustrating her ongoing struggle to reconcile her bohemian lifestyle with traditional Jewish expectations. Works like *The Romance of a Shop* (1888) and *Reuben Sachs* (1888) underscore Levy's interest in the New Woman and the challenges of Jewish identity in Victorian society. While *The Romance of a Shop* offers a hopeful depiction of female independence, *Reuben Sachs* presents a more ambivalent view, critiquing materialism within London's Jewish community while also exposing the limits of assimilation.

By 1889, Levy's health had deteriorated—she struggled with depression and increasing deafness, which compounded her sense of isolation. That year, she completed her final poetry collection, *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse*. On September 10, 1889, Levy died by suicide at her parents' home in Bloomsbury. She was twenty-seven. Though her work received mixed reviews during her lifetime, Levy is now recognized as a pioneering voice on gender, identity, and cultural belonging in Victorian literature.

Luke Devine's *Amy Levy: Collected Writings*, published by Koren Publishers as part of its new Library of the Jewish People series, presents readers with a valuable opportunity to rediscover Levy's life and work. The collection places Levy within the Jewish literary tradition, alongside key figures in Jewish thought, the arts, and politics, while exploring the conflicts that shaped her experience as an Anglo-Jewish writer.

The Collected Writings is divided into several sections, beginning with a "Publisher's Preface," followed by a timeline, a chronology of Levy's works, and the editor's introduction, "Amy Levy and the 'Jewish Literary Complex.'" Levy's three novels—*The Romance of a Shop*, *Reuben Sachs*, and *Miss Meredith*—appear alongside her published poetry collections, *Xantippe and Other Verses*, *A Minor Poet and Other Verse*, and *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse*. It also includes her short fiction, miscellaneous poetry, and essays, many of which are anthologized here for the first time. Works such as "The Ballad of Ida Grey (A Story of Woman's Sacrifice): Part II," "Newnham College," and "A Meadowshire Romance" are reprinted with permission from The Camellia Collections. Devine situates Levy within the contexts of the Victorian New Woman and the Jewish literary tradition, building on Melvyn New's *The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy, 1861–1889* (1993) while incorporating recent discoveries and new perspectives.

Amy Levy: Collected Writings stands out for its remarkable comprehensiveness. It presents the most complete collection of Levy's works to date, including unpublished materials and rare writings previously inaccessible to general readers. For scholars and educators, it offers a wealth of resources for both research and teaching. By assembling these texts, Devine expands the available material and opens new opportunities for scholarly engagement with Levy's work.

Another highlight is the extensive "Chronology of Writings by Amy Levy," one of the most thorough bibliographies of her work ever compiled. This detailed list guides readers through Levy's writings, tracing her intellectual and creative development. Beyond serving as a reference tool, the chronology showcases Levy's evolving thoughts and thematic preoccupations. Devine's collection also distinguishes itself from previous anthologies, such as Melvyn New's edition, by including 36 additional works. A particularly significant example is Levy's 1879 letters to the *Jewish Chronicle* titled "Jewish Women and 'Women's Rights,'" which epitomized her interests in feminism, Judaism, and the tension between autonomy and tradition that informed much of her writing.

Most significantly, Devine's anthology recenters Levy's Jewishness in a way that earlier scholarship did not. While much prior work has highlighted Levy as a feminist and New Woman writer, this collection reframes her work within a Jewish literary tradition. Devine's introduction draws on Dan Miron's concept of the "Jewish literary complex" to explore how Levy's Jewishness influenced her writings, even in works without overt Jewish themes. Through detailed discussions of *Reuben Sachs*, "Leopold Leuniger," her letters and essays for the *Jewish Chronicle*, and her translations of Heine and Jehudah Halevi, Devine examines Levy's responses to antisemitism and internalized cultural tensions. Even works not explicitly focused on Jewish subjects, such as "Medea" with its portrayal of exile and marginalization, reflect Levy's preoccupation with identity and displacement.

While *Amy Levy: Collected Writings* is an impressive and valuable contribution to Levy studies, there are some notable oversights that merit discussion. One of the most significant omissions is the absence of any meaningful acknowledgment of Levy's same-sex relationships and interests. Although several scholarly works on Levy's life and writings have addressed her lesbianism, Devine does not reference it in his introduction or annotations. This absence is striking, especially considering the prominence of queer themes in Levy's poetry and prose. Respectfully,

it seems like a missed opportunity for the collection to engage with Levy's lesbianism and its role in shaping her work and identity. As Devine rightly emphasizes Levy's complex and multifaceted identity, it would have been more illuminating for the collection to address this dimension, rather than avoid it altogether.

Another significant oversight is the lack of sustained engagement with Levy's Anglo-Jewish background. Devine claims in the introduction that Levy was influenced by German Reform Judaism, but there is little acknowledgment of her more immediate Anglo-Jewish milieu. Levy's family belonged to a British Reform congregation, which had its own distinct history and traditions, not entirely dictated by German Reformers. Understanding Levy within this Anglo-Jewish framework is critical, not only because it was the context of her lived experiences but also because it informed her writings. For instance, Devine's analysis of Sephardi identity in *Reuben Sachs* could have been enriched by connecting it to Benjamin Disraeli's and Grace Aguilar's romanticized portrayals of Sephardi Jews. This context would have more clearly situated Levy's work within Anglo-Jewish cultural conversations.

The timeline included in the collection also reflects this broader tendency to underemphasize Levy's Anglo-Jewish background. The timeline is divided into three columns—Levy's life, Jewish context, and global context—providing a helpful overview of concurrent historical events. However, the visual separation of “Jewish” and “global” contexts risks reinforcing a false dichotomy, suggesting that Jewish history is distinct from global history and, by extension, separate from Levy herself. More importantly, the timeline overlooks contemporaneous moments in Anglo-Jewish literary history, such as the publication dates of Emily Marion Harris's *Estelle* (1878) or Julia Frankau's *Dr Phillips* (1887), which could have highlighted Levy's dialogue with other Anglo-Jewish women writers. By focusing on German and European Jewish history, the timeline represents a broader trend in Jewish studies to prioritize German Jewry, leaving Anglo-Jewish history underexplored despite the significant scholarship in the field.

In many ways, *Amy Levy: Collected Writings* reflects the tensions that shaped Levy's life and work. As Devine notes, Levy's identity was complex, rooted in Jewish history and culture yet often in conflict with it. The collection emphasizes this internal struggle, offering valuable insights into Levy's concerns with Jewishness, feminism, and literary modernity. The breadth of previously uncollected materials and the extensive bibliography will undoubtedly serve as a vital resource for

scholars and educators, opening new avenues for research on Levy's life and writings. However, the collection's omissions, particularly the absence of Levy's same-sex relationships and the limited focus on her Anglo-Jewish context, are missed opportunities to explore her multifaceted identity fully. These gaps leave an incomplete picture of Levy's life, and addressing them would have strengthened the broader project of situating Levy within the Jewish literary tradition.

As Koren Publishers continues to build its *Library of the Jewish People* series, these critiques suggest an opportunity for growth. Thoughtfully engaging with authors like Levy would position Koren as an important contributor to Jewish literary scholarship. Future volumes could build on this collection's strengths while embracing the full scope of the authors' lives and contexts, providing a more comprehensive understanding of Jewish literary history. Despite these critiques, *Amy Levy: Collected Writings* makes an important contribution to Victorian and Jewish literary studies. By assembling such a comprehensive archive of Levy's works, Devine brings attention to a writer whose legacy continues to challenge and inspire. The collection invites further exploration of Levy's life and writing, ensuring that her voice remains part of ongoing conversations about identity, modernity, and the complexities of belonging.