

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88097-8 - Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness

Maren Tova Linett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

*Introduction: imagined Jews and the shape
of feminist modernism*

In Virginia Woolf's *The Years* (1937), Eleanor Pargiter describes her philanthropic work with a poor Jewish family, the Levys. She tells her younger sister Milly that "Mrs. Levy had her rent ready, for a wonder. . . . Lily helps her. Lily's got a job at a tailor's in Shoreditch. She came in all covered with pearls and things. They do love finery, Jews'" (*Years* 31). Eleanor's description trades in mild turn-of-the-century stereotypes: the Jewish daughter works for a tailor; she dutifully contributes to the rent; and she ostentatiously displays what little wealth she has. But the stereotypes are uninteresting compared with Milly's response to her sister's narrative. "'Jews?'" said Milly. She seemed to consider the taste of the Jews; and then to dismiss it." With this response Woolf's text leaves the mundane level of stereotype and presents a compelling moment of half-expressed meaning. Milly knows the Levys are Jews; she has heard about them before. But she nevertheless responds to Eleanor's generalization by repeating the word "Jews" interrogatively. Considering "the taste of the Jews" may literally mean considering Jews' taste in "finery." But Milly also seems to be considering the taste of the word or category "Jews." The text hints here that there is something more to consider than Eleanor's vacuous generalization: some intrinsic quality of Jewness, its *essence* in the sense of an extract, a concentrated form of a scent or flavor.¹ This suggestion that Jewishness has a unique "taste" can be viewed as a blueprint for modernist representations of Jewishness. Modernist authors employ stereotypes, but they use them as ingredients within a more diffuse and mysterious Jewishness, a Jewishness that then serves as a device for shaping their fictions on both thematic and metatextual levels.

The Jews of this study are fictional not only in the sense that they live only within works of the imagination, but also because their Jewishness is a result of the authors' vexed imaginings of what Jews are or could be. The

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88097-8 - Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness

Maren Tova Linett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

title of this introduction gestures toward this doubly fictional status of literary Jews, with a nod to Alain Finkelkraut, whose *The Imaginary Jew* (1983) explores the disjunction between post- and pre-Holocaust Jewish identities.² Finkelkraut maintains that contemporary understandings of prewar European Jewry are so suffused with nostalgia as to cast real doubt upon the links postwar Jews feel to their imaginings of prewar Jewish life. Although the representations of Jewishness I focus on in this study are themselves prewar (or more accurately interwar), they, too, are steeped in an atmosphere of otherness. The characters I consider are not ordinary, or simply stereotyped, European Jews, but instead are saturated with meaning. They are exotic or romantic or eerily powerful; they are weighted with pathos and laden with history; they have a peculiar “taste.”

The word “imagined” as opposed to “imaginary,” however, stresses the process by which authors imagine characters as integral parts of their creative projects. They may not understand or intend all of the ways in which the characters will function within their novels, but they intervene in existing antisemitic discourses to position their Jewish characters in ways congruent with both their imaginings of what Jewishness is and their own modernist aims. *Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness* explores the aesthetic and political work performed by Jewish characters in women’s fiction between the World Wars. Focusing mainly on British modernism, it argues that key authors enlist a multifaceted vision of Jewishness to help them shape fictions that are thematically daring and formally experimental. Analyzing the varied meanings and motifs that Djuna Barnes (1892–1982), Jean Rhys (1890–1979), Dorothy Richardson (1873–1957), Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893–1978), and Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) associate with Jewishness, this study explores how the authors use Jewishness to create a modernism they touted as feminist and spiritual in comparison with fiction by their male “materialist” counterparts.³

These writers see in their Jewish characters reflections of their own emotional pain and alienation from literary history. But at the same time, most of them accept cultural images of Jews bound up with biological, financial, patriarchal, and material forces – forces they wanted to exclude from their feminist modernism. This simultaneous identification and distancing produced a fascinatingly complex set of portrayals, in which a Jew is sometimes a model for the author’s art, and sometimes a foil against which her writing must be defined. Taken together, their representations define the contours of interwar Anglo-American allo-Semitism.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88097-8 - Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness

Maren Tova Linett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

“Allosemitism” is a term invented by Artur Sandauer and brought into contemporary Jewish studies by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman.⁴ It refuses the binary of philosemitism and antisemitism – phenomena which so often bleed into one another – and emphasizes instead the ways in which Jews are made other regardless of the ostensible level of approval. This othering, of course, is a process independent of the behavior of actual Jews. In a study of antisemitism published in English in 1936, Hugo Valentin pointed out something of which we still need to be reminded:

The view widely prevalent in Jewish and non-Jewish circles that by acting in this way or that the Jews might have been able to avert anti-Semitism is based on an illusion. For it is not the Jews who are hated, but an imaginary image of them, which is confounded with the reality, and the Jews’ actual “faults” play a very unimportant part in the matter.⁵

Such imaginary targets of antipathy are considered by Slavoj Žižek when he applies Lacanian psychoanalysis to ideology, and more specifically to hatred. In his essay “‘I Hear You with My Eyes’; or, the Invisible Master,” Žižek first compares antisemitism to the castration complex and to the Name of the Father:

I know that castration is not an actual threat, that it will not really occur, yet I am nonetheless haunted by its prospect. And the same goes for the figure of the “conceptual Jew”: it doesn’t exist (as part of our experience of social reality), but for that reason I fear him even more – in short, *the very nonexistence of the Jew in reality functions as the main argument for anti-Semitism* . . .

A homology imposes itself here between the “conceptual Jew” and the ‘Name of the Father’ . . . Is the gap that separates effective Jews from the phantasmatic figure of “conceptual Jew” not of the same nature as the gap that separates the empirical, always deficient person of the father from the Name of the Father, from his symbolic mandate?⁶

But Žižek proceeds to reject the analogy, not because a similar split does not obtain between living and conceptual Jews as between real and imagined threats of castration or the empirical and imagined father, but because “the two splits [between knowledge and belief] are of a fundamentally different nature.” In the case of the father, his authority comes from his assumption of “a transcendent symbolic agency” of which he is the visible embodiment. The “conceptual Jew,” however, must be invisible, “irradiating a phantomlike, spectral omnipotence.” He concludes, “In short, the difference between the Name of the Father and the ‘conceptual Jew’ is that between symbolic *fiction* and phantasmatic

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88097-8 - Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness

Maren Tova Linett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

specter.”⁷ The antisemite’s Jew, then, is more than fictional: he is a phantasm. The Jews of feminist modernism hover in the space between the fictional and the phantasmatic. They are, like other characters, more or less developed, more or less “fully realized” (as Richardson would have it); and yet their effects, their roles in contributing to the narrative a mysterious “taste,” often surpass the fictional and intrude into the realm of fantasy. Žižek’s discussion reminds us that the otherness of modernism’s Jews, though based in comparatively tangible differences of nation, gender, and temporality, also gathers to itself a more inscrutable aura, incommensurate with those differences.

The simplest way the Jews of feminist modernism are othered is along the axis of nationality: very few of them are English. With the exception of Woolf, who leaves us to assume that the Jews in *The Years* and *Between the Acts* (1941) are English (though foreignness clings to them nevertheless), modernist women authors mostly create Jews who are immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe and who therefore justifiably retain an atmosphere of foreignness. But as Bauman argues, allo-Semitism cannot be reduced to xenophobia or heterophobia:

I propose that the proper generic phenomenon of which the resentfulness of Jews is a part is *proteophobia*, not *heterophobia*; the apprehension and vexation related not to something or someone disquieting through otherness and unfamiliarity, but to something or someone that does not fit the structure of the orderly world, does not fall easily into any of the established categories . . . and in the result blurs the borderlines which ought to be kept watertight.⁸

This sense that Jews blur boundaries permeates modernist literature by both male and female authors. Ezra Pound complains of just this problem in Canto XLV, having firmly associated usury with Jews in the Cantos as well as in his critical writings: “with usura the line grows thick / with usura there is no clear demarcation.”⁹ Maud Ellmann suggests that T. S. Eliot’s antisemitism, too, is related to his wish for fixity: “The Jews, for Eliot, represent the adulteration of traditions severed from their living speech and native soil.” Ellmann argues that “by banishing free-thinking Jews from his utopia, [Eliot] was attempting to banish from himself the forces of displacement.”¹⁰ Wyndham Lewis makes clear his similar distaste for slipperiness in a diatribe against what he calls the “time school,” a group of writers and thinkers he associates with Jews and Jewishness. In *Time and Western Man* (1927), Lewis writes that he has a “propensity for the exactly-defined . . . and the concrete” and a repugnance for “surging ecstatic featureless chaos.”¹¹ When he criticizes James Joyce

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88097-8 - Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness

Maren Tova Linett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

for being a member of the “time” group – romantic, childlike, overly psychological – he is careful to point out that it is only accidentally that he has written a “time book”; it cannot be ascribed to his racial origins. Nevertheless, “Mr. Joyce is very strictly of the school of Bergson-Einstein, Stein-Proust.”¹² Lewis favors literature that he aligns with different racial categories: “I prefer the chaste wisdom of the Chinese or the Greek, to that hot, tawny brand of superlative fanaticism coming from the parched deserts of the Ancient East, with its ineradicable abstractness.”¹³

Like Lewis’s chaotic Eastern Jews, the Jews of feminist modernism cross more boundaries than those of national identity. They also fail to fit properly into categories of race, class, gender, and even religion. As this study demonstrates, they signal multiple boundary-confusions: poor workers paradoxically suggest greed, young people are burdened with history, the “ancient race” conjures both timelessness and modernity, and Jewish male characters are feminized.

Money, of course, is the element allosemantic discourse most commonly associates with Jews, and modernist fiction is not above linking Jews with financial matters and materiality. The authors studied here, though, do not usually portray wealthy Jews. Rather, they imagine poor Jews who are nevertheless metaphorically associated with money. Unlike Edith Wharton’s Simon Rosedale in *The House of Mirth* (1905), whose vast wealth enables him to buy his way into high society, the Jews in the novels I consider tend to live modestly and even struggle financially; the only wealthy character is the offstage Ralph Manresa in Woolf’s *Between the Acts*. As chapter 1 demonstrates, however, the issue of money is never far from the surface when Jews are represented. Indeed, even when a Jew is portrayed as unusually disinterested, that portrayal depends for its power on the opposing image of the greedy Jew. So boundaries of class and wealth are confused, not so much because the characters themselves have ambiguous class status, but because the texts metaphorically overlay their representations with suggestions of money interest and greed.

The category of time, usually divided into identifiable pasts, presents, and futures, is blurred by imaginings of Jewishness that simultaneously stress the timelessness of the Wandering Jew, the “ossification” of Judaism, and the allegedly hypermodern characteristics of urban Jews. The discourse that claims that the Jew is both ancient and timeless partakes of Christian and racist discourses. Jews could connote antiquity because according to a dominant strand of Christianity, which I explore in chapter 2, Jewish history ended when it was “fulfilled” by Christ.¹⁴ Many modernist novels, most obviously *Ulysses* (1922) and *Nightwood* (1936), draw on

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88097-8 - Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness

Maren Tova Linett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the image of the Wandering Jew doomed by Jesus to wander the earth until the end of days.¹⁵ This image embodies and sustains the ancientness and timelessness Christianity ascribed to “the Jew.” Jonathan Boyarin argues that this temporal positioning was a way for Christian Europe to distance its Jewish other. Because Jews lived inside its imperial centers, Europe could not easily consign them to faraway *places*; it banished them instead to the past.¹⁶

Moreover, early twentieth-century racial discourse described the progress of Jews and other “lower races” as slowed or stopped. George Stocking describes how race science classified and hierarchized human groups in a theory called “social evolution”:

Social evolution was a process by which a multiplicity of human groups developed along lines that moved in general toward the social and cultural forms of western Europe. Along the way different groups had diverged, regressed, stood still, and even died out . . . The progress of the “lower races” had been retarded or even stopped, but the general level had always advanced.¹⁷

The prominence of this version of race science meant that a connection with the past, which Judaism already had for Christian cultures, implied racial unfitness for the modern world. It is as a result of the confluence of these Christian and racist notions, animating modern semitic discourses, that Jewishness came to represent a static kind of time in which Jews, who were obviously living, were relics nevertheless. And confusing things further, Jews were associated with various aspects of modernity: nervousness, alienation, the city, capitalism and/or communism. These strands of semitic discourse are analyzed by Bauman, Matti Bunzl, Sander L. Gilman, George Mosse, Judith Walkowitz, and others.¹⁸ I examine literary versions of the association with modernity in chapter 3, and consider other aspects of the temporality of Jewishness in chapters 4 and 5.

In addition to time, gender is among the most important of the categories whose borders Jewish characters blur. The Jewish men of feminist modernism are feminine even when they threaten women’s autonomy with their sexist attitudes. Their femininity is part of a larger cultural association between Jewish men and femininity that began to flourish in the late nineteenth century, and that Otto Weininger’s 1903 *Sex and Character* (*Geschlecht und Charakter*) strongly reinforced. Lewis put this view succinctly in *Hitler* (1931), describing Jews as “[f]eminine, and in many ways unpleasant.”¹⁹ It finds expression, too, in Elizabeth Bowen’s *The House in Paris* (1935), where the protagonist’s mother says of her

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88097-8 - Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness

Maren Tova Linett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

daughter's Jewish lover, "there is always that touch – Jewish, perhaps – of womanishness about him that a woman would have to ignore and yet deal with the whole time."²⁰ The association has been traced to at least four roots. Sigmund Freud ascribes a subconscious belief that Jewish men are emasculated (castrated) to fears of circumcision. In his analysis of Little Hans, Freud writes that "[t]he castration complex is the deepest unconscious root of anti-Semitism; for even in the nursery little boys hear that a Jew has something cut off his penis – a piece of his penis, they think – and this gives them the right to despise Jews." He then mentions Weininger, proposing a reason Weininger equates Jews with women: "Being a neurotic, Weininger was completely under the sway of his infantile complexes and from that standpoint what is common to Jews and women is their relation to the castration complex."²¹ Sander Gilman relies on this linkage in his influential studies of discourses that portray the Jewish male body as feminine, hysterical, and diseased.²²

A second explanation is implied by Ritchie Robertson, in an essay on Weininger: he traces the feminization of Jewish men to older images of sensual Jewish women.²³ I gather from this that the association of Jewishness with bodiliness (which I discuss in detail in chapter 4) is a major source of the link to women, since women were already connected to the body while (gentile) men were linked to reason, intellect, or the soul. (Weininger makes this distinction explicitly, describing Jews and women as soulless.)

A third source of this feminization is proposed by Matthew Biberman, who argues that it emerged from the needs of a somewhat deflated model of masculinity when bourgeois capitalism supplanted the chivalric code: "[A]ntisemitism functioned initially as a ceiling for men: it represented a range of stigmatized masculine behavior (e.g., avarice, sexual dominance, cruelty) in a culture that simultaneously enshrined the image of the masculine Christian knight as the pinnacle of manhood." But when "the merchant dislodged the knight . . . the Jew now served as the floor for modern male identity . . . The new vision – the Jew-Sissy – enabled the proper Christian male to acquire a sense of superiority."²⁴

And a fourth explanation is offered by Daniel Boyarin, who suggests that there is some basis in reality for the claim that Jewish men of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century diaspora were more feminine than Christian men. Boyarin ascribes this phenomenon to Talmudic culture, which resisted militaristic models of manliness, valuing instead qualities, such as delicacy and gentleness, which Western Christian cultures associated with women.²⁵ These four explanations differ in the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88097-8 - Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness

Maren Tova Linett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

degree to which they historicize and validate the phenomenon of the feminine Jewish man, but they are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, they trace what are surely intertwined strands of one of the most powerful images of Jews in modern literature.

The feminization of Jewish men, of course, has consequences for the representation of Jewish women. One outcome is their relative absence: as Ann Pellegrini puts it in *Performance Anxieties* (1996), “in the homology Jew-as-woman, the Jewish female body goes missing. All Jews are womanly but no women are Jews.”²⁶ Not surprisingly, there are very few major Jewish women characters in modernism. Molly Bloom is half-Jewish, but until the dubious “womanly” narrative of the [final chapter](#), she is more object than subject in *Ulysses*. Warner’s Minna Lemuel, an important character in *Summer Will Show* (1936) (whom I discuss in chapters 1 and 3), is that rare thing, a central character who is both female and Jewish. Pellegrini counters the erasure of the Jewish woman by bringing “the construction of the Jewish female more directly into analysis” in her readings of Freud, Sarah Bernhardt, and Sandra Bernhard.²⁷ While my discussions of Warner’s Minna do not focus on the erasure of Jewish female bodies, they do consider the confluence of her femininity and Jewishness as part of Warner’s feminist revision of antisemitic discourse.

The image of the effeminate Jewish man created a strong ambivalent response in the writers considered here. As feminists they (like the diasporic Jewish women Boyarin describes) appreciated feminine qualities in men: gentleness, humility, nurturance, patience, loyalty, and domestic skill (think of Leopold Bloom making breakfast for Molly every morning). Woolf married a nurturing Jewish man; Richardson seriously considered marrying her gentle Jewish suitor Benjamin Grad; Rhys found friendship at a low point in her life with Simon Segal, a compassionate Russian-Jewish painter she met in Paris. All these men are represented, with various degrees of verisimilitude, in fiction. But *ars longa, vita brevis*, and feminine Jewish male *characters* run into one or both of these problems: the writer’s misogyny, which, despite her feminism, limits her approval of these qualities in men (this is especially the case with Rhys, and with Richardson in the first part of her career); and/or the writer’s antisemitism, which prompts her to align the Jewish male character with other less positive attributes and prevents her from embracing the feminized Jewishness she has constructed. They also run up against biology – no matter how gentle, these characters are men, and moreover, men linked through their Jewishness to what the authors considered the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88097-8 - Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness

Maren Tova Linett

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

source of Western patriarchy: the “Old Testament” and its patriarchal God. Their authors thus engage in literary versions of feminist anti-semitism, which I discuss particularly in chapter 4.

Given the extent to which Jewish characters are bound up with these financial, temporal, and gender issues – and indeed, as critics are beginning to note and as I argue here, bound up with the very project of many writers’ modernisms – one might well be surprised to find how limited the history of critical attention to modernism’s dealings with Jews has been. As Bryan Cheyette points out in his 1993 study *Constructions of “the Jew” in English Literature and Society*, many prior critical treatments of literary Jews offered ahistorical descriptions of stereotyped Jewish characters, assuming that those stereotypes remained fixed from Chaucer to Joyce. Cheyette, on the other hand, has shown that semitic discourse – his term for the ways a given culture understands and portrays Jews at a particular time – is inherently unstable and ambivalent, structured by contradictions. Only recently, then, have critics learned to approach representations of Jews and Jewishness in more nuanced and historicized ways. This has left much ground to be visited and revisited.

In the past decade there has been renewed interest in representations of Jews in modern English poetry and fiction. Several book-length studies of allo-Semitism and its role in the creation of modernism have focused on canonical male authors such as Henry James, Pound, Eliot, and Joyce.²⁸ In addition, *Modernism/Modernity* has published two special sections on “T. S. Eliot and Anti-Semitism: The Ongoing Debate” and sponsored a roundtable on the same topic at the 2004 Modernist Studies Association Conference in Vancouver.

But restricting such studies to canonical male authors stems from – and perpetuates – three key misconceptions about modernist literature. First and fundamentally, it extends the obvious limitations of canonicity itself, narrowing the field of inquiry and implying that only those few authors were innovative, influential, or reflective of cultural biases. Second, focusing only on male authors’ use of semitic discourse encourages the assumption that only male modernism depended on such discourse for its self-definition, an error I particularly wish to correct. Third, neglecting to study women authors’ representations of Jews bolsters the view that because these authors were feminist, antifascist, and often bisexual or lesbian, their political stances about Jews must be similarly progressive. That is, there is a tacit assumption within modernist criticism, lingering from first- and second-wave feminism, that it was the male authors who were antisemitic and sometimes fascistic (with the celebrated exception of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88097-8 - Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness

Maren Tova Linett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Joyce), whereas the female authors were “politically correct” across the board.²⁹ This third misconception remains powerfully at play especially in criticism of Woolf, whose undeniable antisemitism continues to be downplayed by reverential critics. Erin Carlston notes that “Sapphic Modernism in particular is often aligned with a politically progressive ‘modernism of the margins’” and points out that “any systematic division of political tendency along gender lines is inadequate” to describe the political valence of “writing by both men and women.”³⁰

However, as I challenge these problematic assumptions, my goal is not to condemn authors for writing antisemitic scenes or using Jewishness as a foil for their characters’ growth. Instead, I am interested in documenting how allo-Semitism functions for the authors as they craft their literary responses to prior and contemporary “masculine realism” (to use Richardson’s phrase). Given scholars’ emphasis during the last few decades on issues of race, nation, sexuality, and gender, of marginality and diaspora, of “minor” literature and canon-formation, it is vital to examine the ways Jewishness was instrumental to early twentieth-century imaginings of these socio-political categories and processes. By exploring the political and literary power of semitic discourse for key women authors, *Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness* fills a significant gap in the account of the cultural and literary forces that created modernism. The study demonstrates how central imagined Jewishness was to the literary milieu that produced not only Eliot and Joyce, but also a body of important fiction by women. Precisely because “outsider” Jews reflected for women authors their own tenuous standing in literary circles, their portrayals seem to me particularly interesting, contradictory, and worthy of study.

When Bonnie Kime Scott refers to key women modernists as “the women of 1928,” she not only suggests a riposte to Pound’s valorization of “the men of 1914” but highlights a salient fact about literary modernism: women’s modernism arrived late on the scene.³¹ For the most part, modern women novelists published their first major creative works in their thirties, while their male counterparts had begun to define modernist fiction in their twenties. To take three canonical examples: Ernest Hemingway published two collections of stories in his early twenties, and his first novel in 1926, at age twenty-seven. D. H. Lawrence published his first novel, *The White Peacock*, in 1911, at age twenty-six. Joyce published *Chamber Music* in 1907 when he was twenty-five, and would have published *Dubliners* at around the same time but for a seven-year battle with his publishers over its language. By contrast, Warner was thirty-two when